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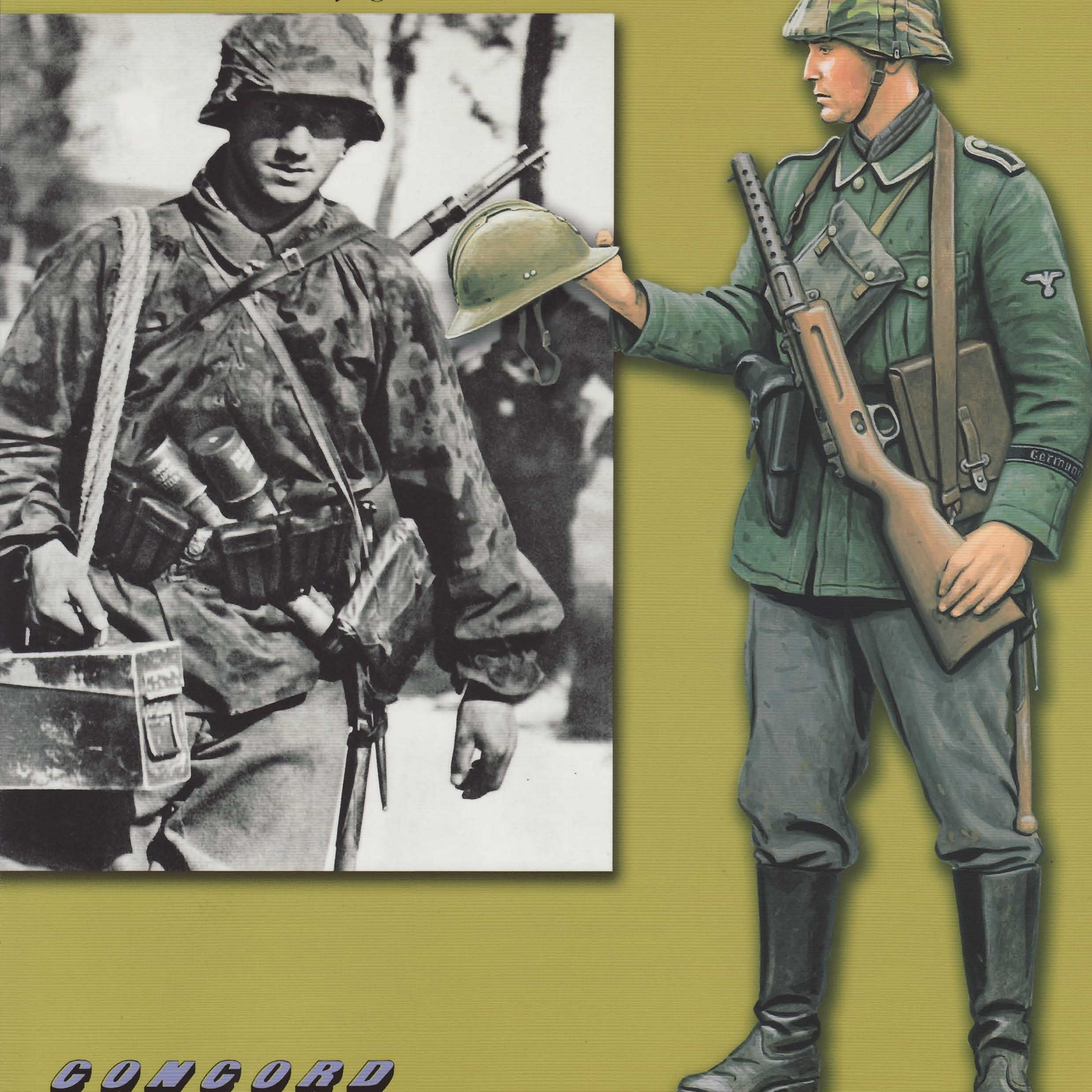
Into the Cauldron

Das Reich in France 1940

Robert Michulec & Dmitriy Zgonnik



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Text by Robert Michulec
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INTRODUCTION

Between 1933 and 1939, the power of the *SS* grew considerably with thousands of men being recruited into the new ideological elite armed formation under the command of Heinrich Himmler. All early recruits were expected to meet very stringent criteria. Every volunteer had to be fit with excellent racial features and produce a certificate of good behavior from the Police. During their tough training program new recruits was indoctrinated into an almost fanatical determination to fight for the *Führer*, even if it meant shedding one's own blood on the battlefield. With blind allegiance he was to step out and join one of the newly created armed *SS* divisions where he would obey every order, even if it meant shooting prisoners and committing atrocities against civilians.

The first SS units to see action were known initially as the SS-Verfügungstruppe (Special Disposal Troop). These SS-VT units were trained by the army and eventually organized into the higher level units – regiments. There were two regiments established, Deutschland and Germania and both had a typical strength of 3-battalions. In 1938, a third regiment was raised called "Der Führer".

For the invasion of Poland SS-VT units and other German military forces mobilized and took up their positions in preparation for an attack on the Poles. One of the formations that were used for the attack was called Panzer-Division "Kempf", named after its commander, Major General Werner Kempf. This division was in the 1.Korps of the 3.Armee and was given the task of attacking out of East Prussia. The infantry regiment attached to Division-Kempf was the "Deutschland" Regiment. Other SS-VT units serving under Kempf's command included the artillery regiment, the FlaK machine-gun battalion, reconnaissance battalion, and the signals battalion. The "Germania" Regiment, the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler (LAH) and other SS forces served in areas further south in other Heeresgruppen. The "Germania" Regiment was attached to various sections of the 14.Armee, whilst the "Der Führer" Regiment remained in the Black Forest still undergoing training and recruiting duties.

Across the border of East Prussia, the "Deutschland" Regiment and other units attached to the 3.Armee attacked Poland on the morning of 1 September 1939. Its objective was Warsaw but it was soon confronted by stiff resistance by well-entrenched network of fortifications. In southern Poland, the "Germania" Reigment and other units attached to the 10. and 14.Armees converged toward the River San. As participants of the first Blitzkrieg of World War Two, the SS-VT units became involved in this experimental style of warfare. The type of combat they fought was exactly what the SS wanted. At last, they seemed to have the opportunity to unleash their elite forces to help smash the Polish war machine quickly and efficiently.

Following the crushing of Poland in early October 1939 the SS leadership took a decisive decision to quickly build up the SS-VT forces and organize them into higher level units. In the month that followed the Polish campaign, the SS grew to include some 100,000 troops. During this time, the armed branch of the Schutzstaffel (Guard Detachment) officially became known as the Waffen-SS. Out of this new Waffen-SS formation the "Totenkopf" Division was established, whilst division "Kempf" was disbanded and completely re-created into a new SS motorized division composed only of SS-VT units. Within a few weeks the new division was re-named as the Verfügungs Division. For the next several months the newly established division would engage in intense training in preparation for the coming war against the West.

By the spring of 1940 the SS-VT was organized into three regimental units, each of them consisting of three battalions with three infantry companies and one heavy company. The infantry companies were all motorized and armed with three light mortars, two heavy and nine light machine guns. The heavy weapons company consisted of six mortars and eight machine guns. Additionally in each of the regiments there were integrated five companies and platoons, which composed of a platoon of armored cars, an anti-tank company with twelve 3.7cm PaK36/35 guns and a motorcycle company. There was also a unit's band in each of the regiments. Incorporated into the division there were four combat units of battalion size that composed of an anti-tank battalion with three companies of twelve 3.7cm PaK35/36 guns in each of them, a reconnaissance battalion with two motorcycle companies that were armed with 22 machine guns and three light mortars, and a platoon of armored cars used as the main fighting component. Pioneer and FlaK battalions were organized into three companies. The FlaK unit was armed with 36 heavy machine guns. The division was supported with standard supply troops with an artillery regiment composing of three battalions, each of them consisting of three batteries of twelve 10.5cm howitzers, all of which were motorized.

When Germany finally unleashed their military might on the West in May 1940, the SS-VT Division and other formations crossed the Dutch border to join in the invasion of Holland. In this early stage of operations the units with the SS division operated separately. The "Der Führer" Regiment, the 2.Battalion of the division's artillery regiment, a pioneer company, and a vehicle column had been attached to the 207.Infanterie-Division. The SS-Verfügungs Division's reconnaissance detachment and the Deutschland Regiment's armored car platoon served with the 254.Infanterie-Division. Both these SS units attacked along the Dutch frontier in the 18.Armee. It did not take long before the "Der Führer" Regiment received its baptism of fire and served as the spearhead of the invasion. Behind "Der Führer", the rest of the SS-Verfügungs Division waited with many other units within the army, while the forward echelons of the 207.Infanterie-Division pushed into the Netherlands.

During the initial stages of the campaign the SS performed well and penetrated deep into enemy lines. Constantly with great enthusiasm SS troops were seen leading furious attacks upon the bewildered Dutch troops soon occupying the eastern end of Fortress Holland, and once again pushed through the enemy lines, enabling 10.Korps to sweep past Utrecht and into the Dutch capital, Amsterdam. Although the "Der Führer" Regiment had achieved noticeable success for its actions in Holland, the rest of the SS-Verfügungs Division did not see as much extensive action in the country. During the early phase of the attack the main body of the division had been advancing in two motorized columns to Hivarenbeck, a town north of Antwerp. Yet in spite this slow start to the invasion the SS-Verfügungs Division soon secured German control over the western end of Holland, whilst Wehrmacht troops of Heeresgruppe B moved across into Belgium, captured Brussels, swept through Belgium and into northern France, and then began spearheading its powerful forces towards the English Channel. On the evening of the 22 May, the SS-Verfügungs Division proceeded with the 6. and 8.Panzer-Divisions toward the port of Calais in order to help strengthen German positions west and south of the Dunkirk perimeter. It seemed that Dunkirk would soon be captured but on the night of 26 May Hitler rescinded his famous 'halt order' and "Germania" and "Der Führer" of the SS-Verfügungs Division surged back into action and fought a bloody battle in the de-Nieppe forest. The remaining infantry regiment, "Deutschland", which was temporarily attached to the 3.Panzer-Division, took part in the attack against British units on the Lys Canal near Merville where the SS troop met spirited resistance.

With the first phase of the war in the West completed, the Battle of France began. On 5 June 1940 German Panzergruppen attacked along the whole line. As elements of Panzergruppe Kleist steamrolled towards Paris the "LAH" and the SS-Verfügungs Division joined the main drive. By the time the SS formations arrived on the outskirts of Paris, the French capital had been abandoned by its government. Panzergruppe Kleist, including the "Totenkopf", "LAH" and the SS-Verfügungs Division, struck through Champagne toward Dijon in Burgundy to prevent the remnants of the French Army retreating to the south-west of France. By 25 June 1940, the day on which the ceasefire went into effect, the "Totenkopf" and SS-Verfügungs Division were near Bordeaux, preparing to occupy the coastal sector.

By the end of June the campaign in the West was finally over. For the men of the SS and indeed those of the SS-Verfügungs Division combat in Western Europe had served as yet another opportunity for them to show their mettle in combat. Following the victory over France, many soldiers and their commanders received accolades for the bravery and leadership in the field. After spending a brief period of time guarding the western coast of France near the Pyrenees Mountains, the SS-Verfügungs Division was relocated to Holland to oversee the demobilization of the Dutch armed forces.

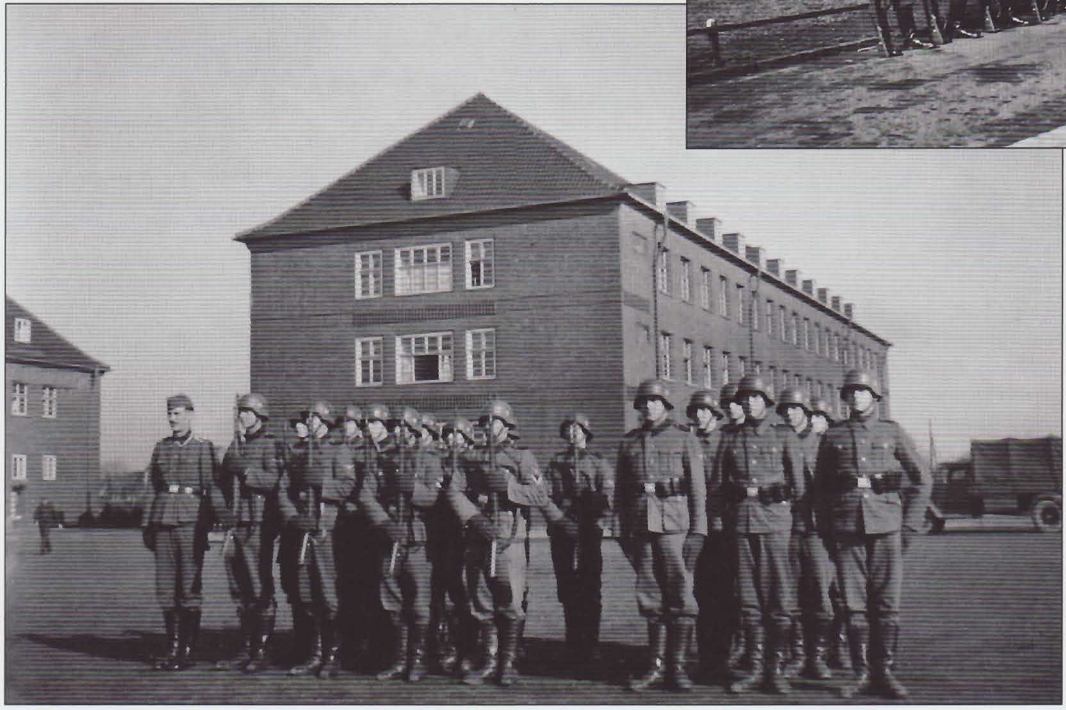
Later in the year the SS-Verfügungs Division returned to southern France and was stationed at the town of Vsoul. In December 1940, the SS-Verfügungs Division was renamed to SS-Deutschland-Division. A month later, the name of the division was yet again changed and would now become known as SS-Reich Division (Motorized). In addition, the renamed division received more troops, a motorcycle battalion and its divisional tactical sign.

By March 1941 the Reich-Division was ready for combat once again and was transported from southern France to south-west Romania where the soldiers wondered where their next campaign would take place. Within a month their deliberations were soon settled when they received orders to attack Yugoslavia with the sole objective to capture the capital, Belgrade. With days the SS-Reich-Division was given the honor of leading the charge into Belgrade. By this time there was little opposition and the city was captured with few casualties.

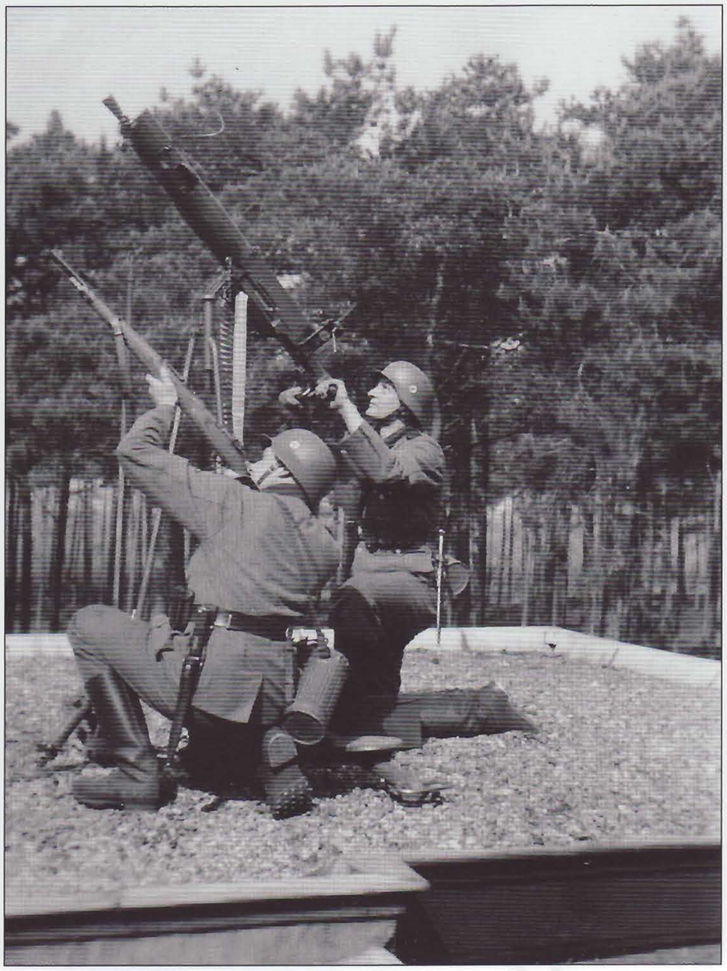
After fulfilling its role in Yugoslavia the SS-Reich-Division returned to Romania and later moved to an area near Salzburg, Austria for a rest and refit. During this period the division was reorganized. It composed of the two SS regiments, "Der Führer" and "Deutschland", but both were given three very strong battalions of motorized infantry regiments, composing of a motorized battery of artillery, platoons of motorcycle rifles, as well as armored cars. The division had a very strong artillery regiment that composed of four battalions (standard was three) with three companies in each of them. Additionally there were reconnaissance and anti-tank battalions armed with 3.7cm and 5cm anti-tank guns. To infantry support and to increase anti-tank capability the division received a StuG.III battery (organized in February) and a heavy armament for its anti-aircraft battalions. After 1 June the battalion was supported by twelve 8.8cm FlaK guns, which would become useful not only against air but ground targets too.

By mid-June the SS-Reich-Division had moved to Poland and taken up positions near the River Bug for reparations against a new and even greater enemy, the Soviet Union. It would be here in the heartlands of Russia where the famous "Reich" division would become famous as one of the elite formations of the Waffen-SS.

Two photographs showing an infantry platoon's section during drill exercises in the unit's barracks in early spring 1940. Training for the men in the SS was very intensive. Every SS instructor placed great emphasis on aggression and every possible means in which to overcome the enemy quickly and efficiently, with the least amount of casualties.

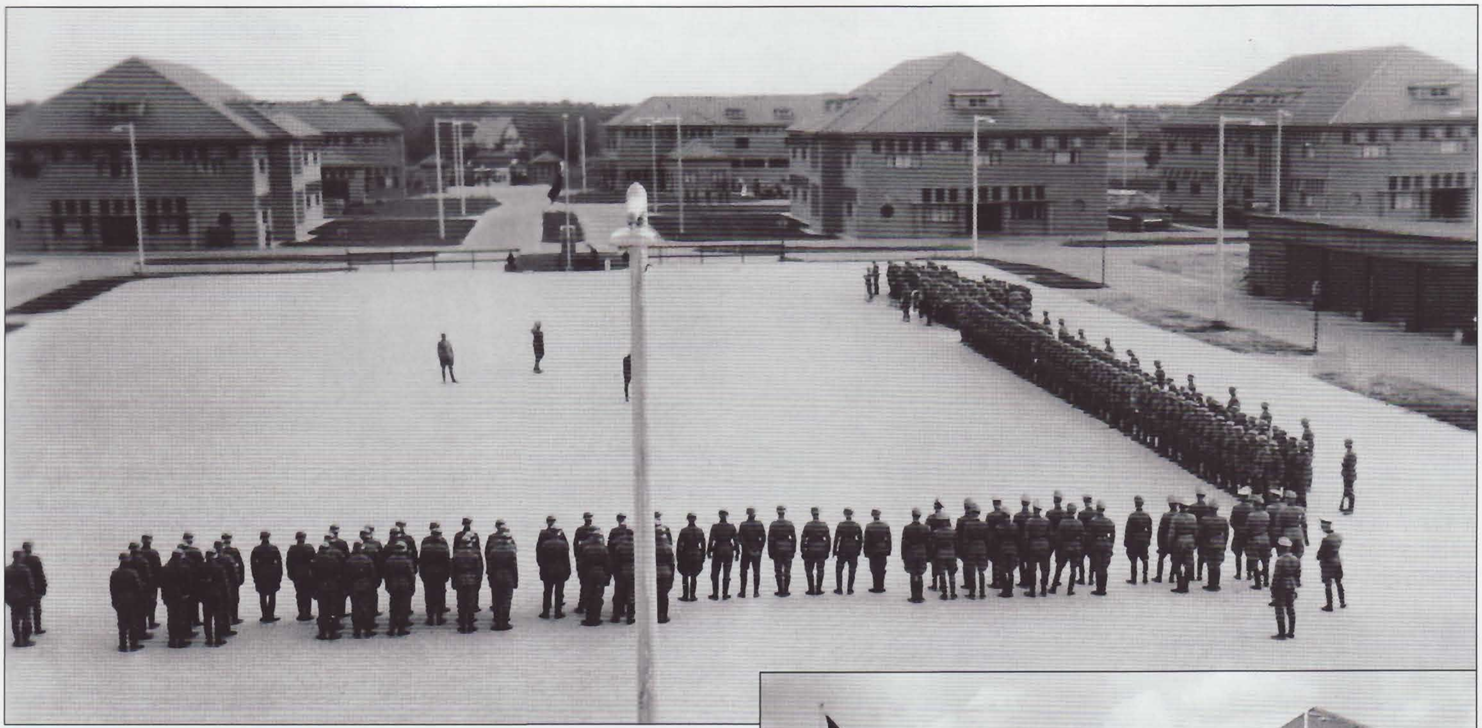


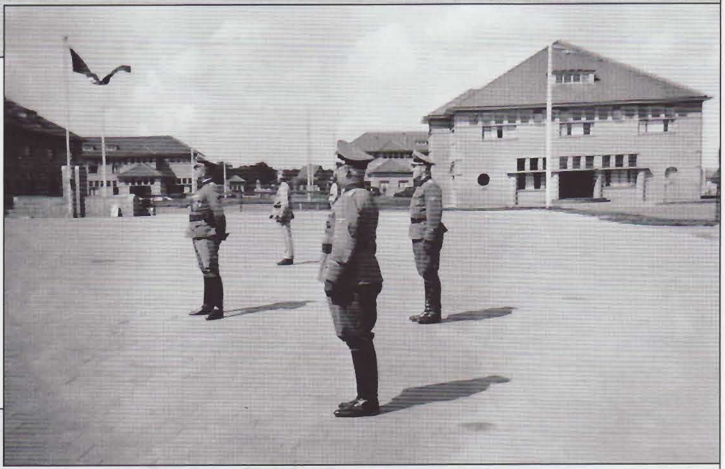
Another drill exercise. Unlike the Wehrmacht, whose basic training was drill and more drill, SS training emphasized physical toughness and fighting skills.



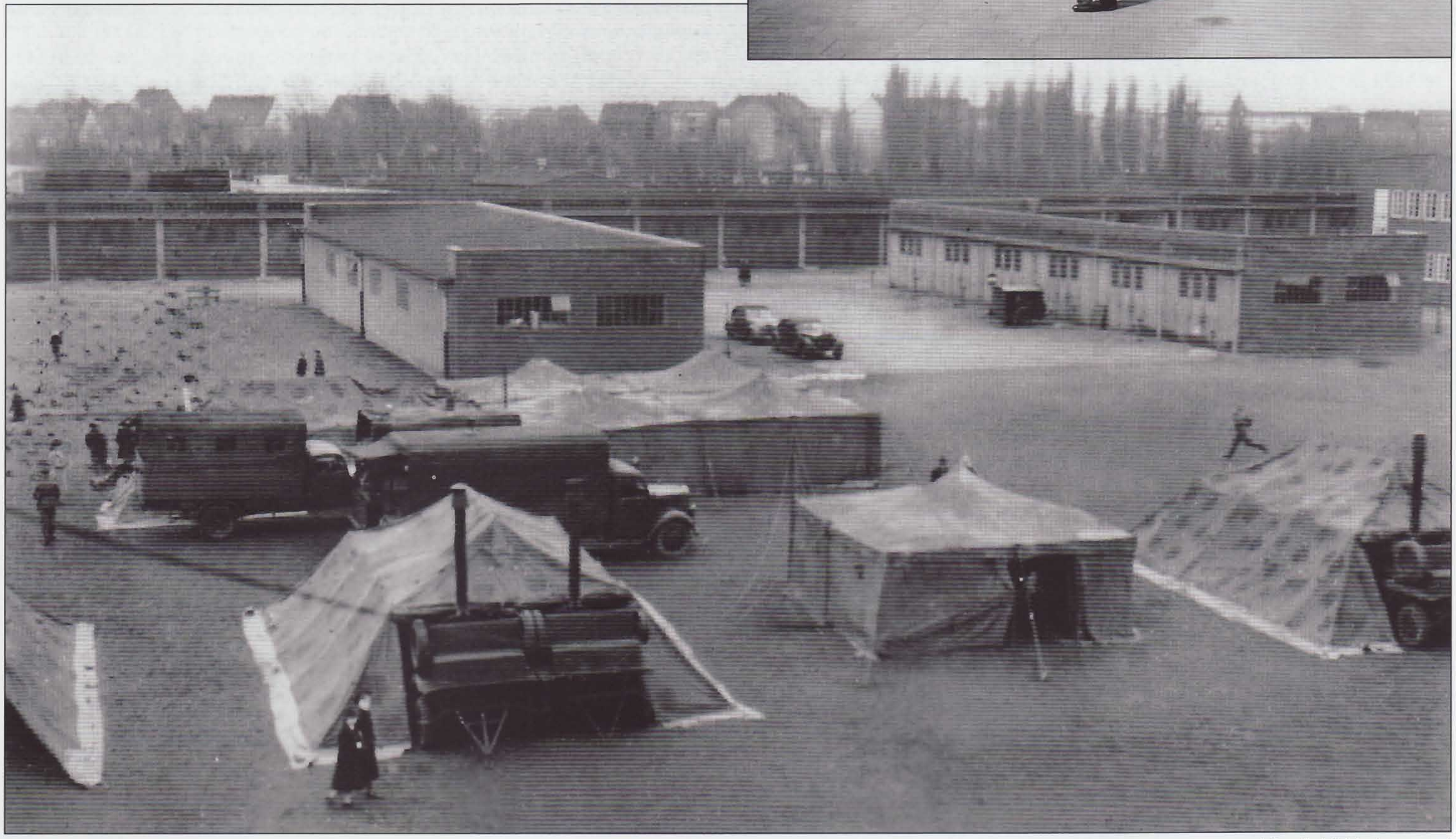
An anti-aircraft section during a training exercise armed with a heavy machinegun 08/18 mounted on a special AA tripod and a Kar98k bolt action rifle.

Three photographs showing a regimental SS band during different stages of training. Training for the SS recruit continued to be very intensive. Those trainees successful enough to pass were rewarded with the passing-out parade, where the SS oath was taken.

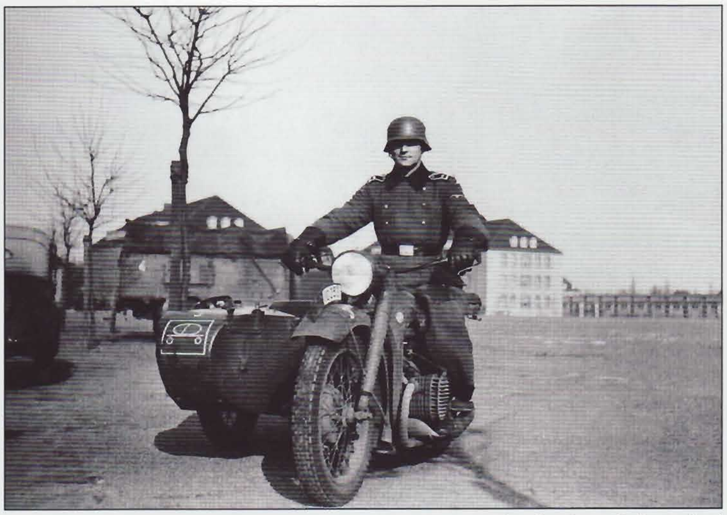




Speech made by the commanding officers to their troops on the main square of the unit's barracks. The top photograph shows a very good view of the SS garrison. All the officers have arm-bands probably with the "Germania" inscription.

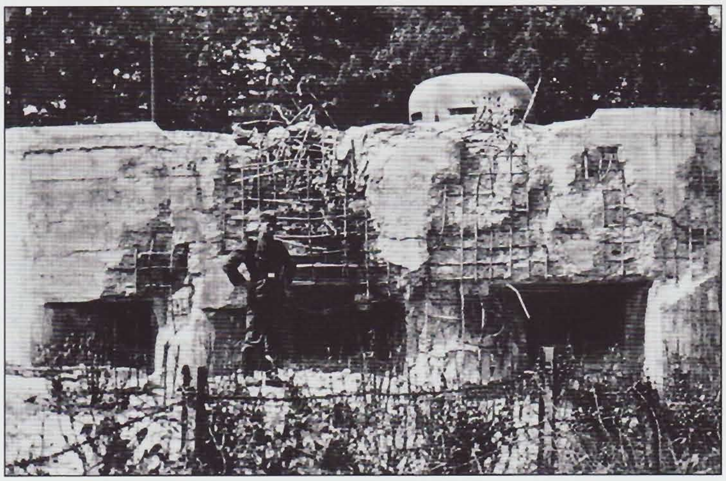


A good view of the "Das Reich" barracks, including garages and the square used for exercises. Beneath the camouflaged tents is a mobile field kitchen and bakery.



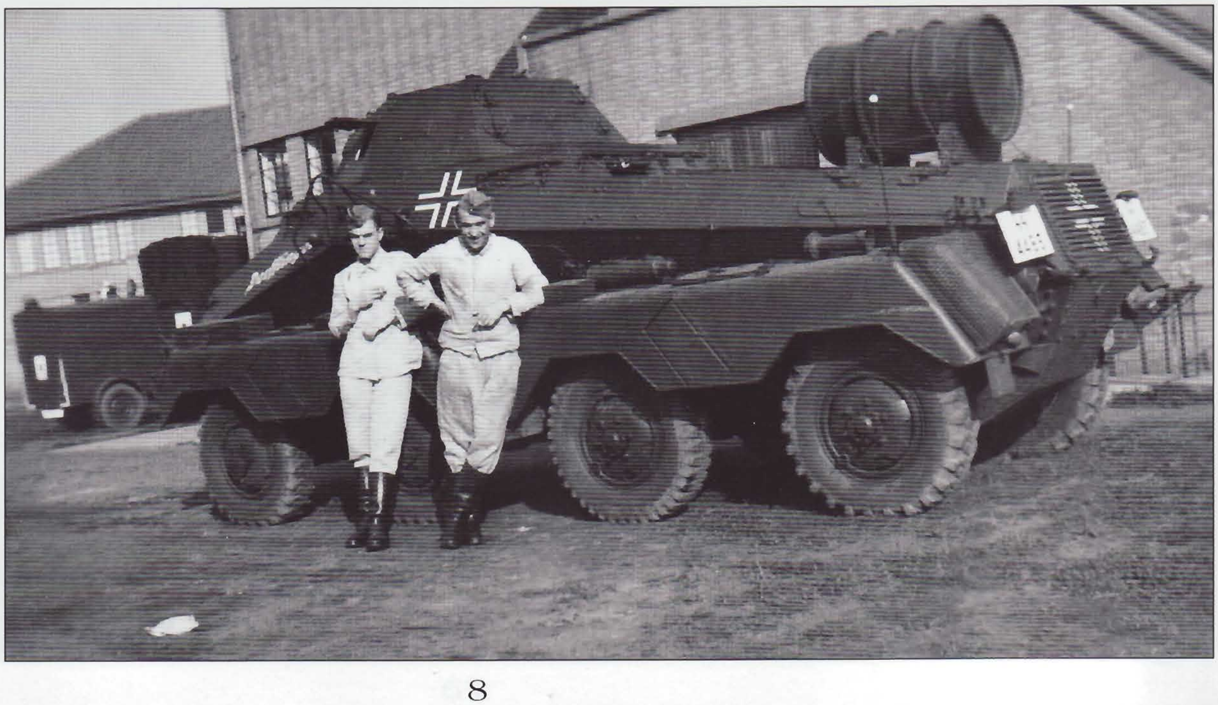
A BMW motorcycle with sidecar combination which displays full tactical markings indicating that it's the 3rd vehicle in a bakery company. Behind the motorcyclist is a stationary Opel Blitz truck.

Troops pose for the camera in front of a civilian bus that has been pressed into service by the SS. In France the Germans relied heavily on various light and heavy civilian vehicles for transport. Maintaining the momentum of an advance was paramount to the successful conduct of operations and as a consequence there was a wide variety of commercial vehicles in service in the German Army.

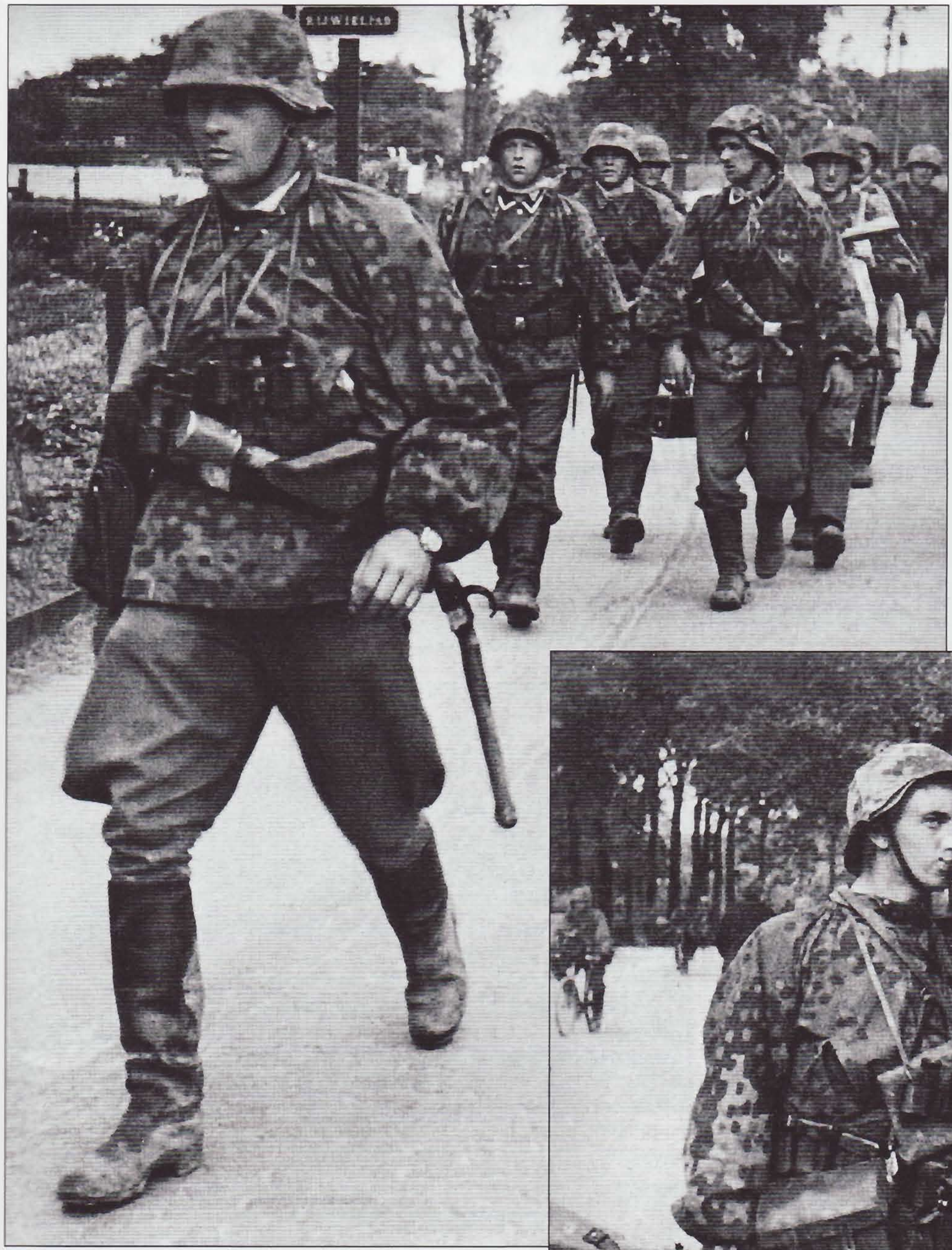


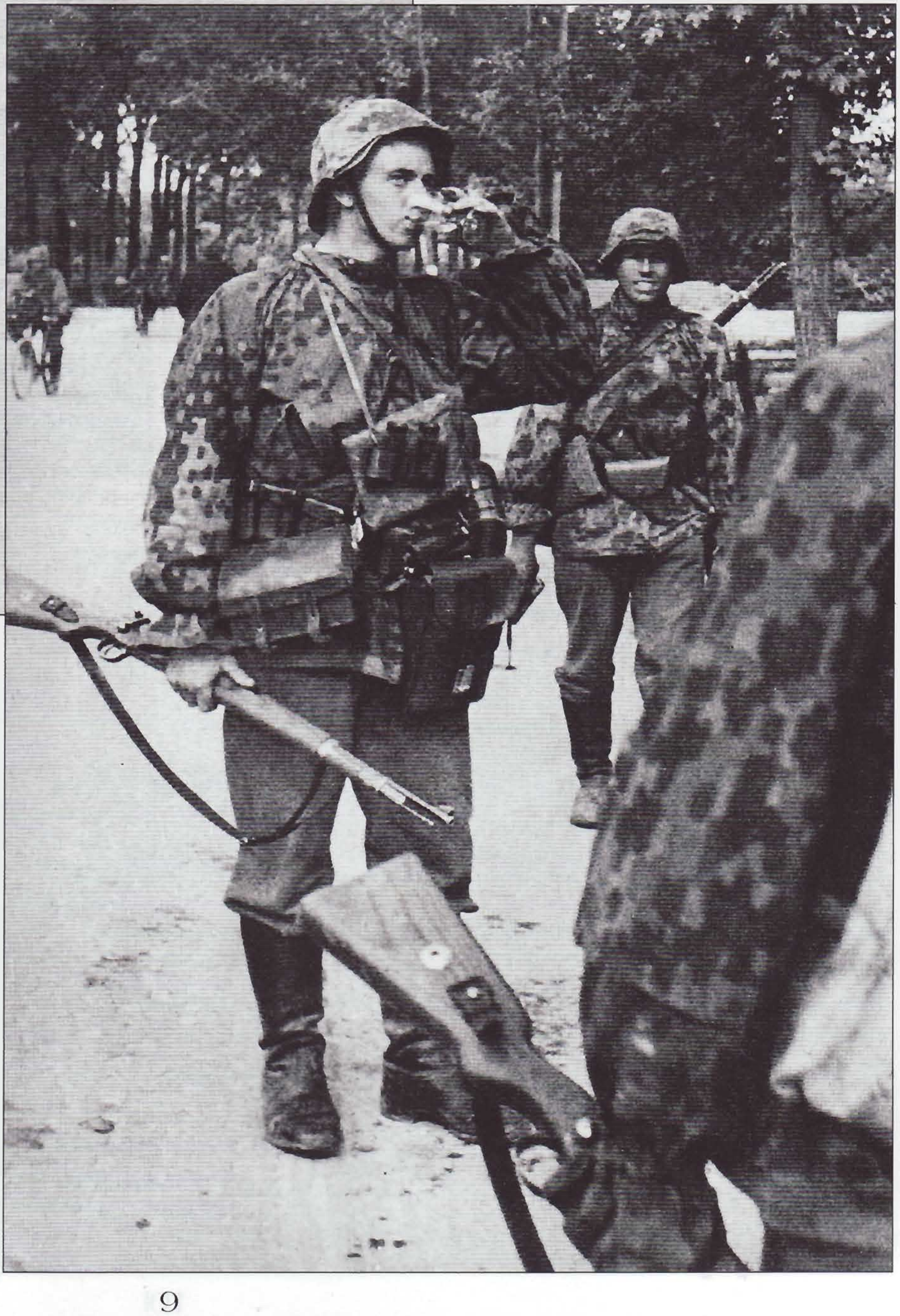
A "Das Reich" soldier poses for the camera in front of a French bunker installation that has just fallen into German hands following heavy fighting in the area. Note how artillery shelling has caused extensive damage to the fascia.

A long column of vehicles have halted on a congested road during the initial stages of the German attack against the Low Countries and France in May 1940. During the night of the 9/10 May the "LAH" and the "Der Führer" Regiments moved to their start lines to link up with the airborne troops that would be dropped at dawn to seize the vital bridges and airfields in the Low Countries. In spite of the speed of the attack many vehicles during the opening phase of the campaign were held-up along whole stretches of roads leading into Holland, including the SS-VT Division.



Two crewman pose for the camera dressing in their fatigues in front of their Sd.Kfz.231 which is armed with a 2cm gun. Of interest is the 300 liter fuel drum attached to the engine deck of the vehicle.



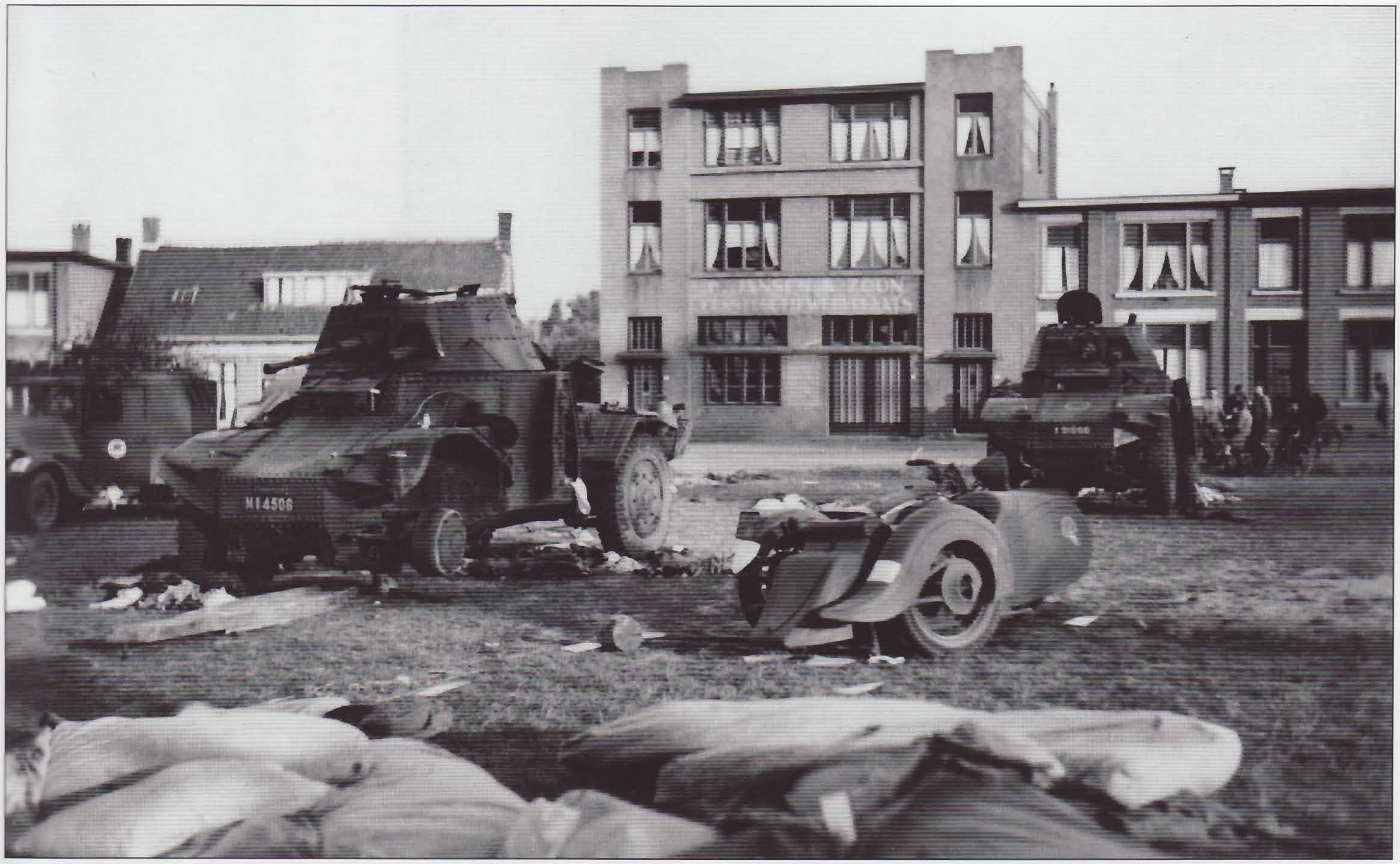


Two photographs showing "Das Reich" troops in a captured town in Holland. The troops wear their smock over the standard field gray uniform and the foot wear is the original tall leather marching boots. The equipment is that of a typical German infantryman. They are armed with the standard Karabiner 98k and have M1920 stick grenades tucked into their belt.

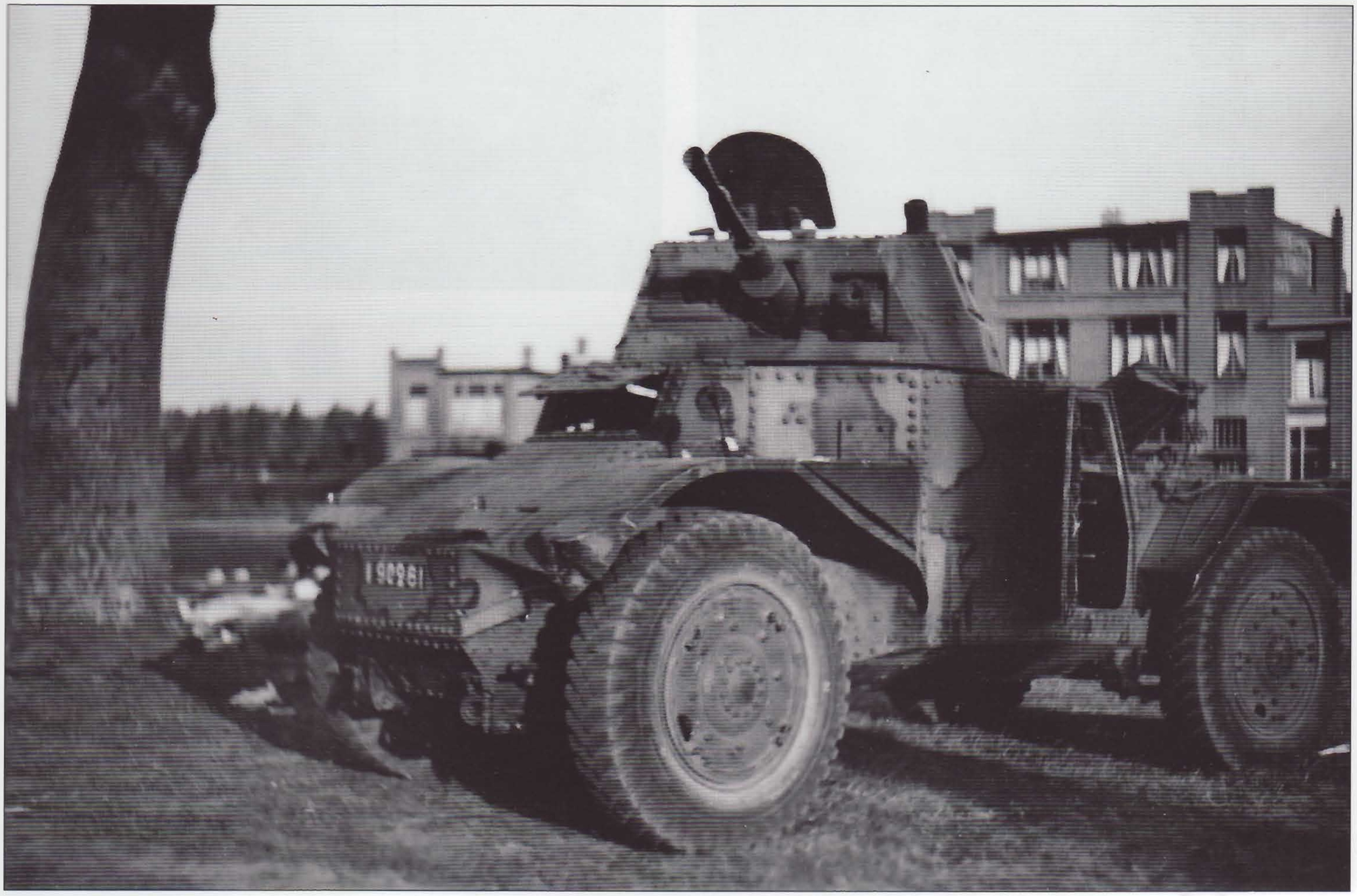
Troopers barely visible in a well concealed battle position at the edge of crater after detonation of a demolition charge. Most of the frontline troops were equipped with camouflage smocks and covers for the invasion of the west.

Two photographs showing a road littered with the carnage of war. A French column of horse drawn transport have more than likely been attacked by aircraft during "Das Reich's" furious drive through France in May 1940.

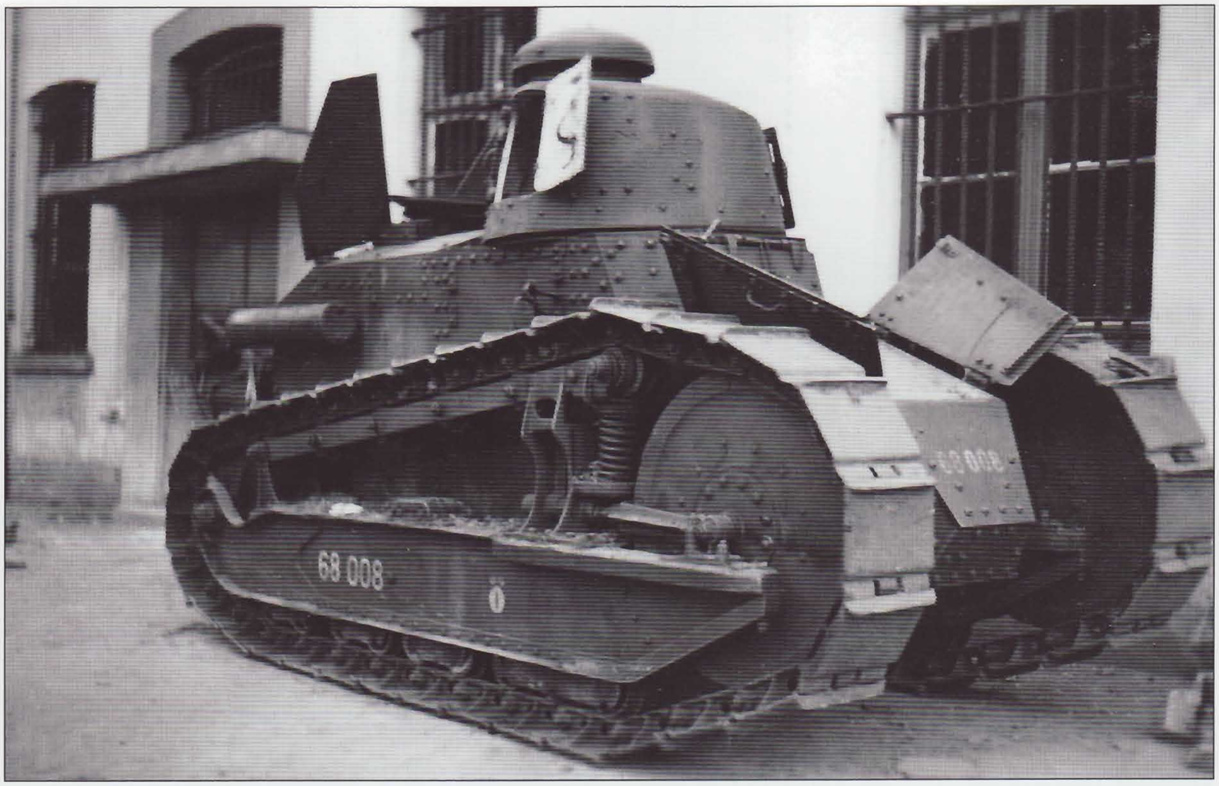
"Das Reich" soldiers examine battlefield booty and an array of captured vehicles including a "Panhard" armored car. The Germans regarded the "Panhard" as a vehicle type so well-suited to German tactics, that 190 of them were eventually issued to German reconnaissance units for use in Operation Barbarossa in 1941 under the designation of Panzerspähwagen P204 (f), 107 would be lost that year. Thirty "Panhards" were listed as in use on the Eastern Front on 31 May 1943.



Two photographs showing knocked out enemy vehicles inside a French town captured by one of the "Das Reich" units. The photos show the famous "Panhard" armored car, which was one of the very best such vehicles in the world at this time. This 4x4 armored car was designed for the French Army before the war. It had a crew of four and was equipped with a 25mm main armament and a 7.5mm coaxial machine gun.

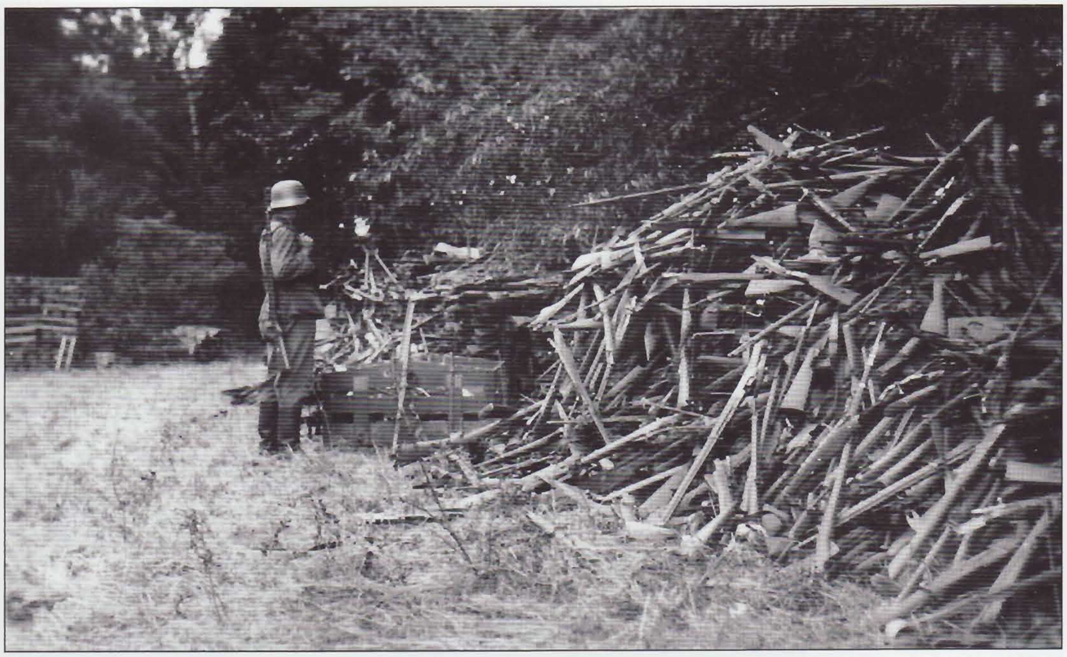


Another war trophy of "Das Reich" pictured here showing an old Renault FT-17 tank with serial 68008. The FT-17 was the first tank with an armament in a fully rotating turret, and its configuration with the turret on top, engine in the back and the driver in front became the conventional one, repeated in most tanks until today.

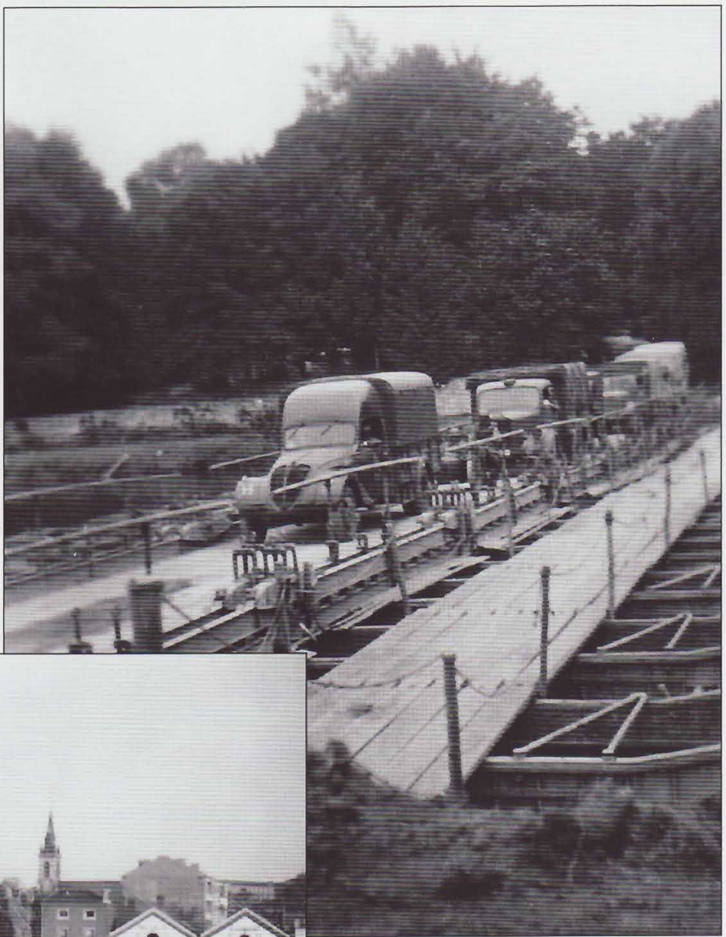


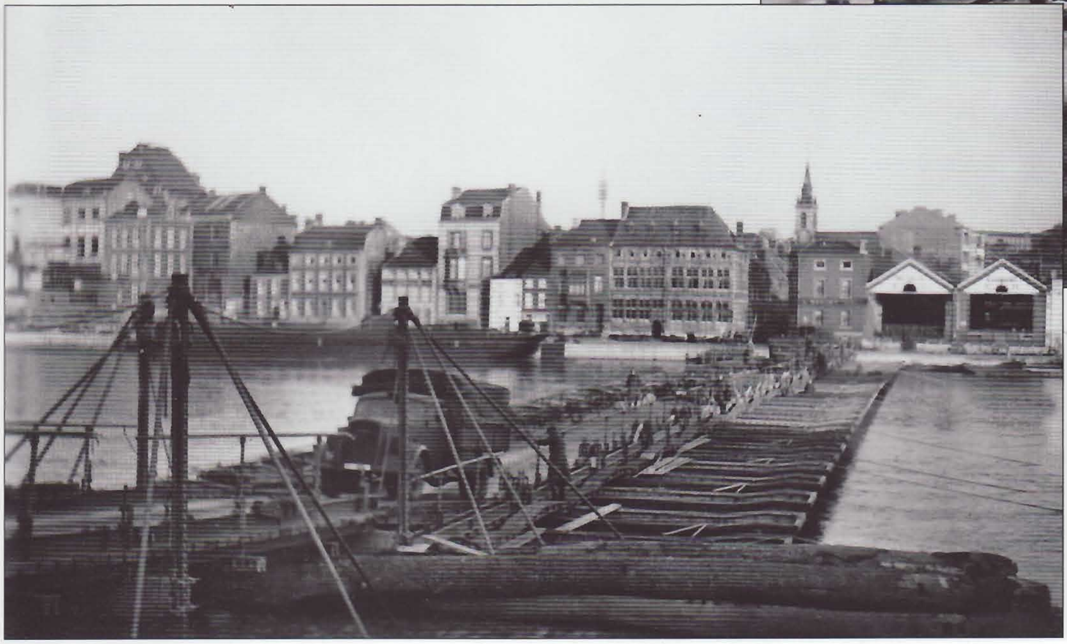
Four photographs showing a column of "Das Reich" Opel Blitz trucks heavily layered with dust pass a long column of French prisoners in late May 1940. SS registration plates and road markings are very well visible. Note the Moroccan soldiers being escorted to the rear. It is uncertain the fate of these Moroccan troops, but it is clear that a high percentage of them were killed by racially motivated SS troops. During the last days of May "Das Reich" units re-established contact with French formations and took part in plugging the gaps left by the rapidity of the German advance.

A "Das Reich" photo showing captured equipment following the destruction of a French unit. There are a variety of small arms, including rifles such as the Berthier Mle 1907-15 and 07-15 M16, as well as a few MAS 36 and 11mm rifle Chassepot or Gras model are heaped to one side. Heavier weapons like the 25mm and 47mm anti-tank gun can also be seen including the 75mm WWI model field gun.

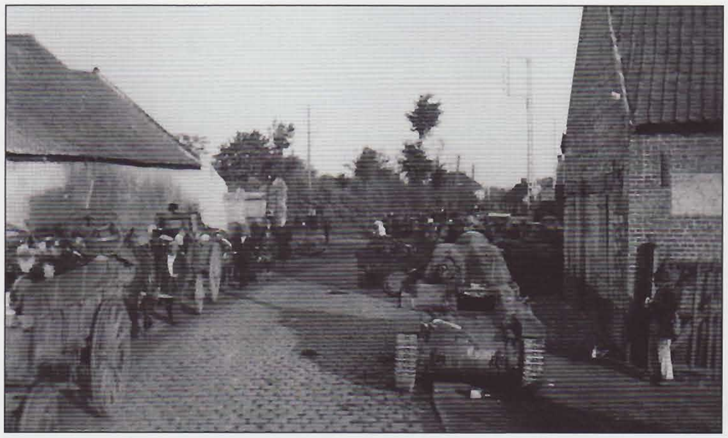


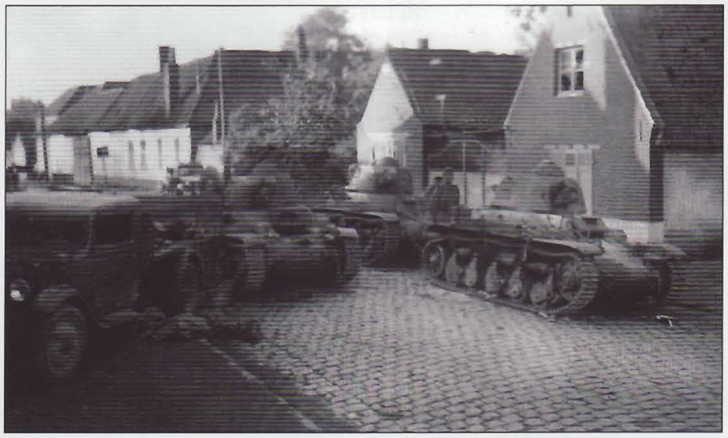
Vehicles of the division well camouflaged with nets and foliage under some trees during a pause in the march. An anti-aircraft MG34 machine gun position can be seen mounted on a tripod and pointing skyward.



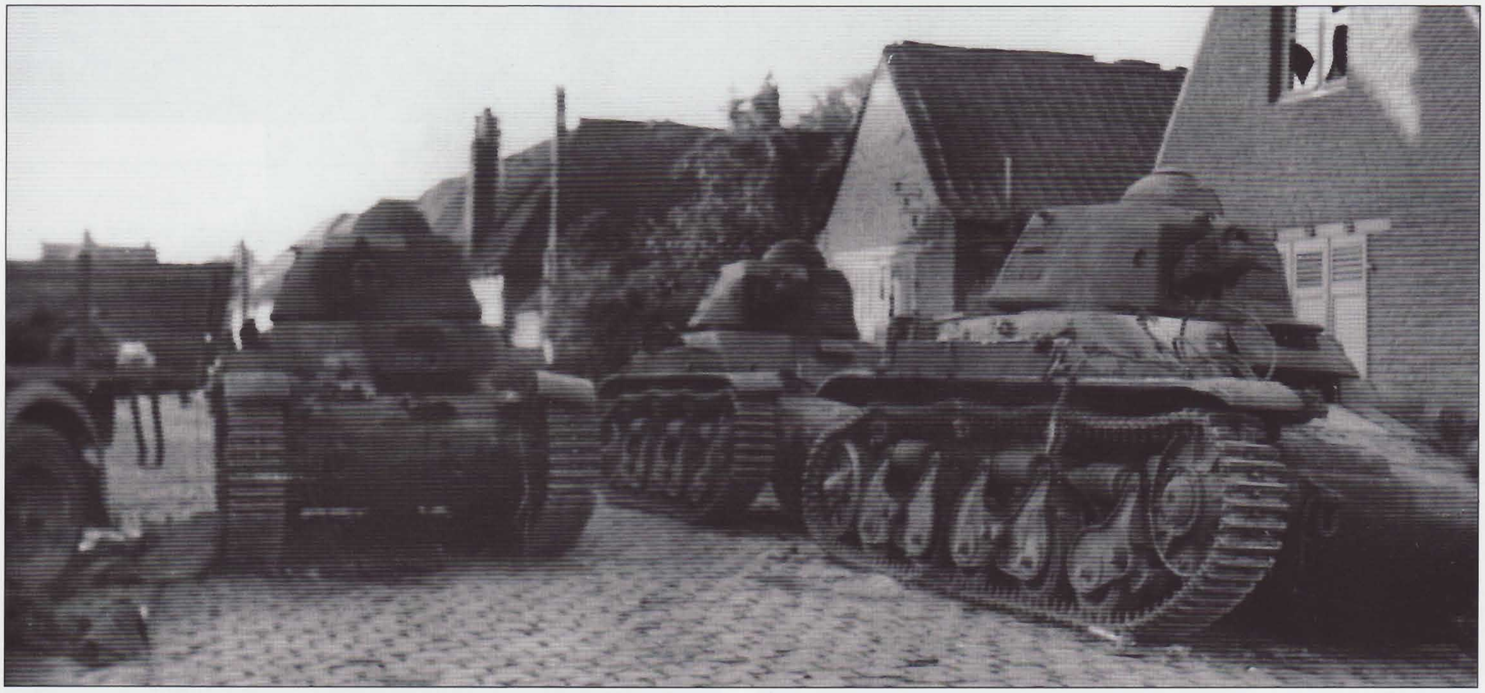


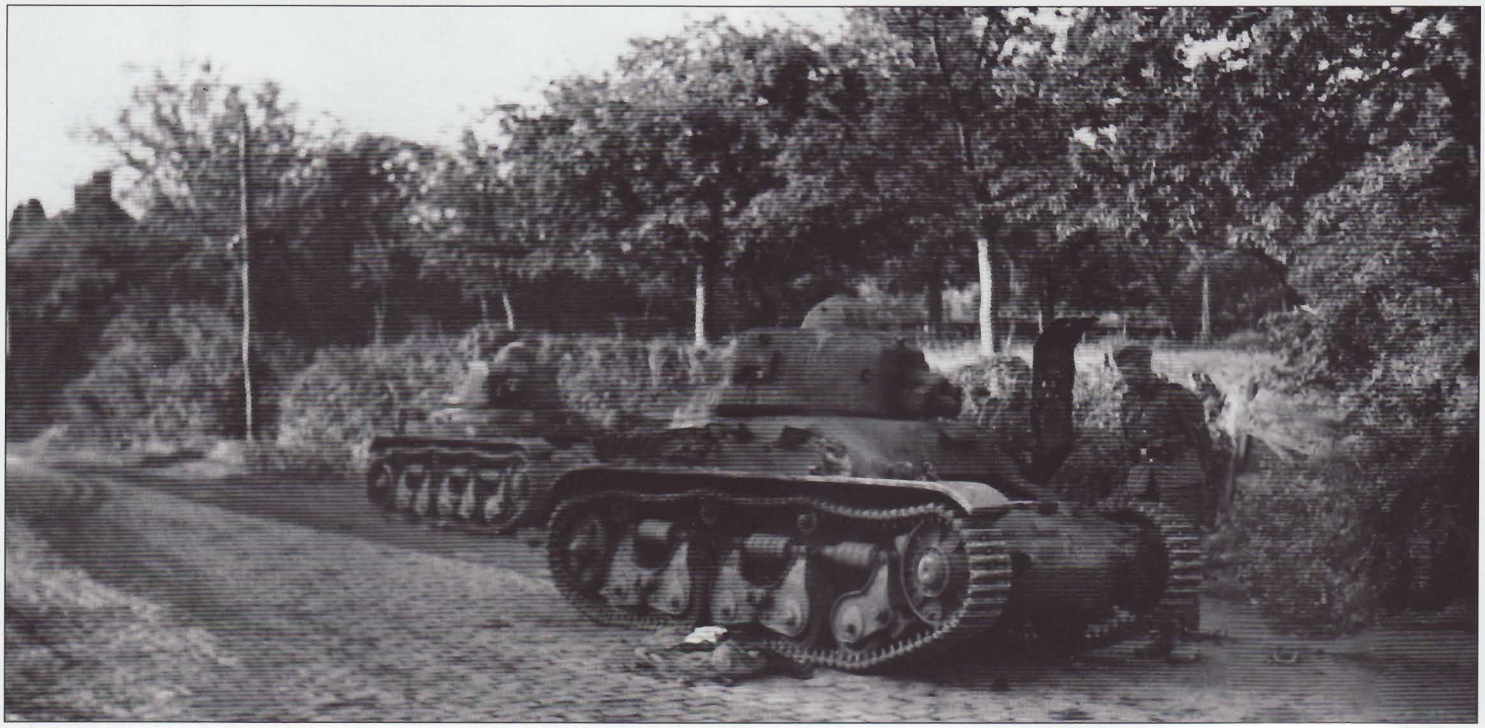
Two photographs show "Das Reich" Opel Blitz trucks crossing a pontoon bridge over a river followed by other vehicles of the division. The "Blitz" trucks were one of the best vehicles used by both the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS for transporting men and supplies to the front lines.

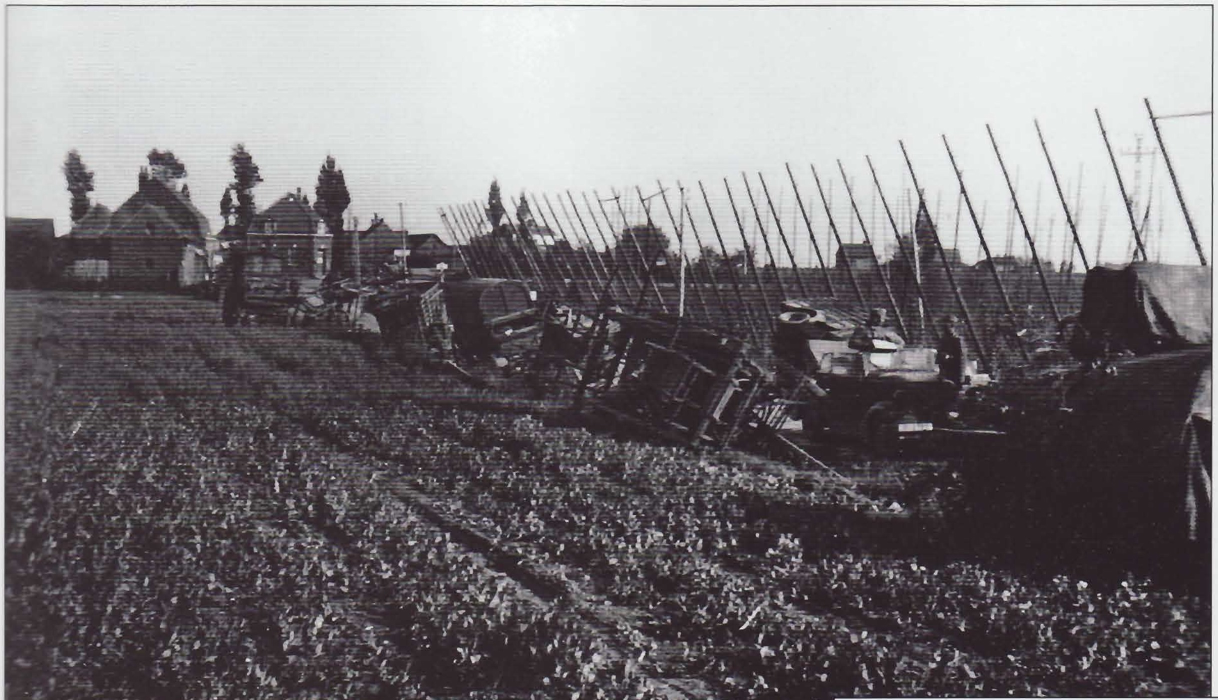




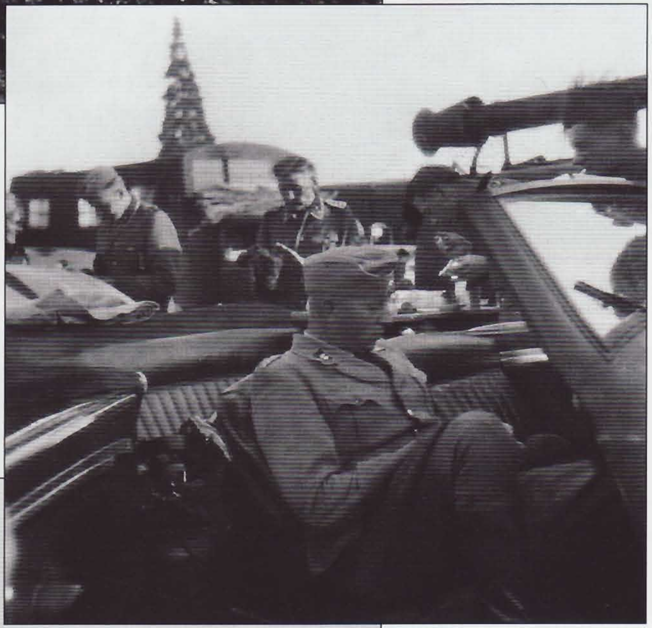
A series of four photographs showing tanks and other vehicles of an unidentified French armored unit abandoned in a town. Refugees can be seen fleeing from the front as German troops examine the Renault R-35 light tanks. The R-35 was used extensively during the battle of France. It was armed with a 37mm short gun and crewed by two men.



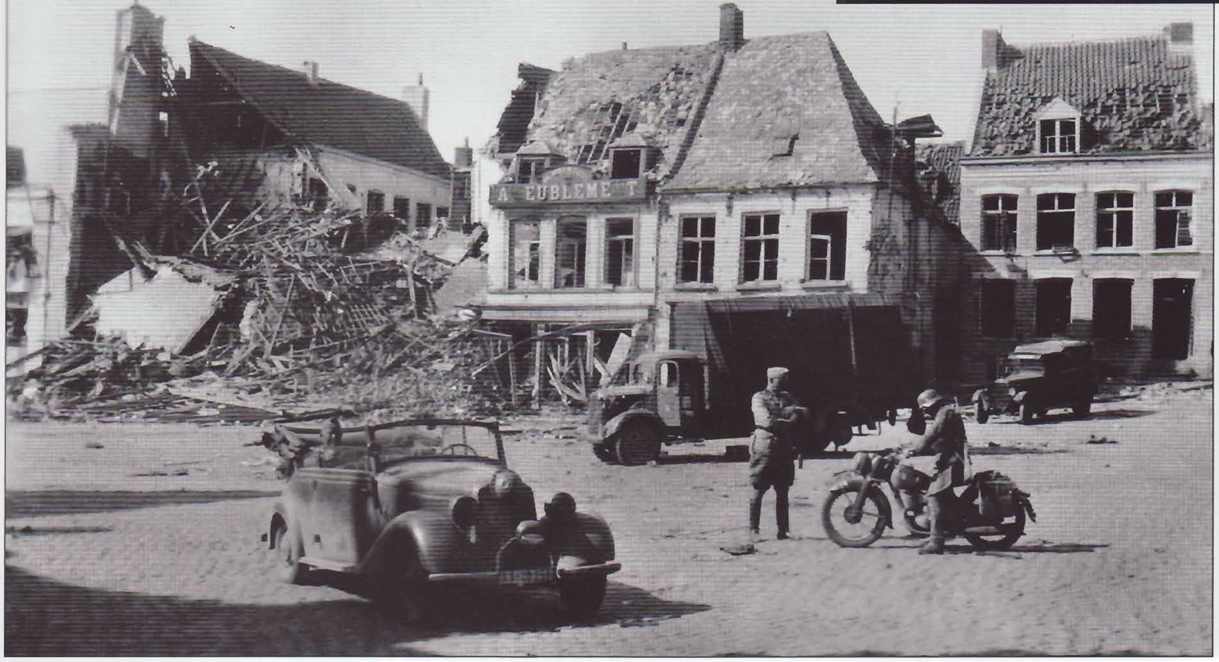




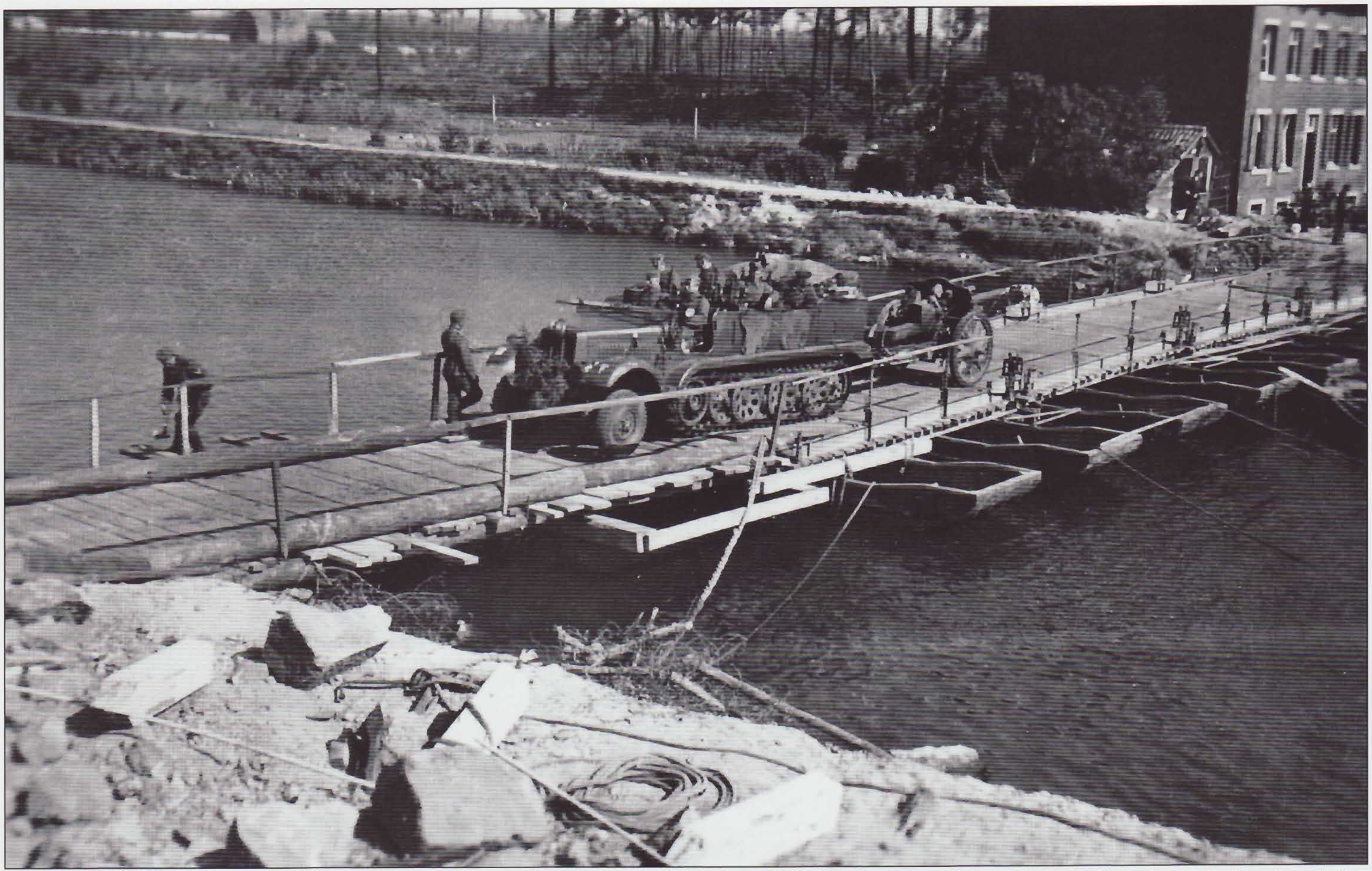
Divisional staff car of "Das Reich" is traveling along a road that had been previously blocked by abandoned French vehicles. German troops, however, have removed the vehicles, pushing them to the side in order to allow vehicles to move unhindered.



Officers and NCOs of a company command during a pause in the march across France tuck into some of their rations. Of interest is the non combat uniform blouse of the officer sitting in the staff car. His boots and belt are also of the nonstandard type.



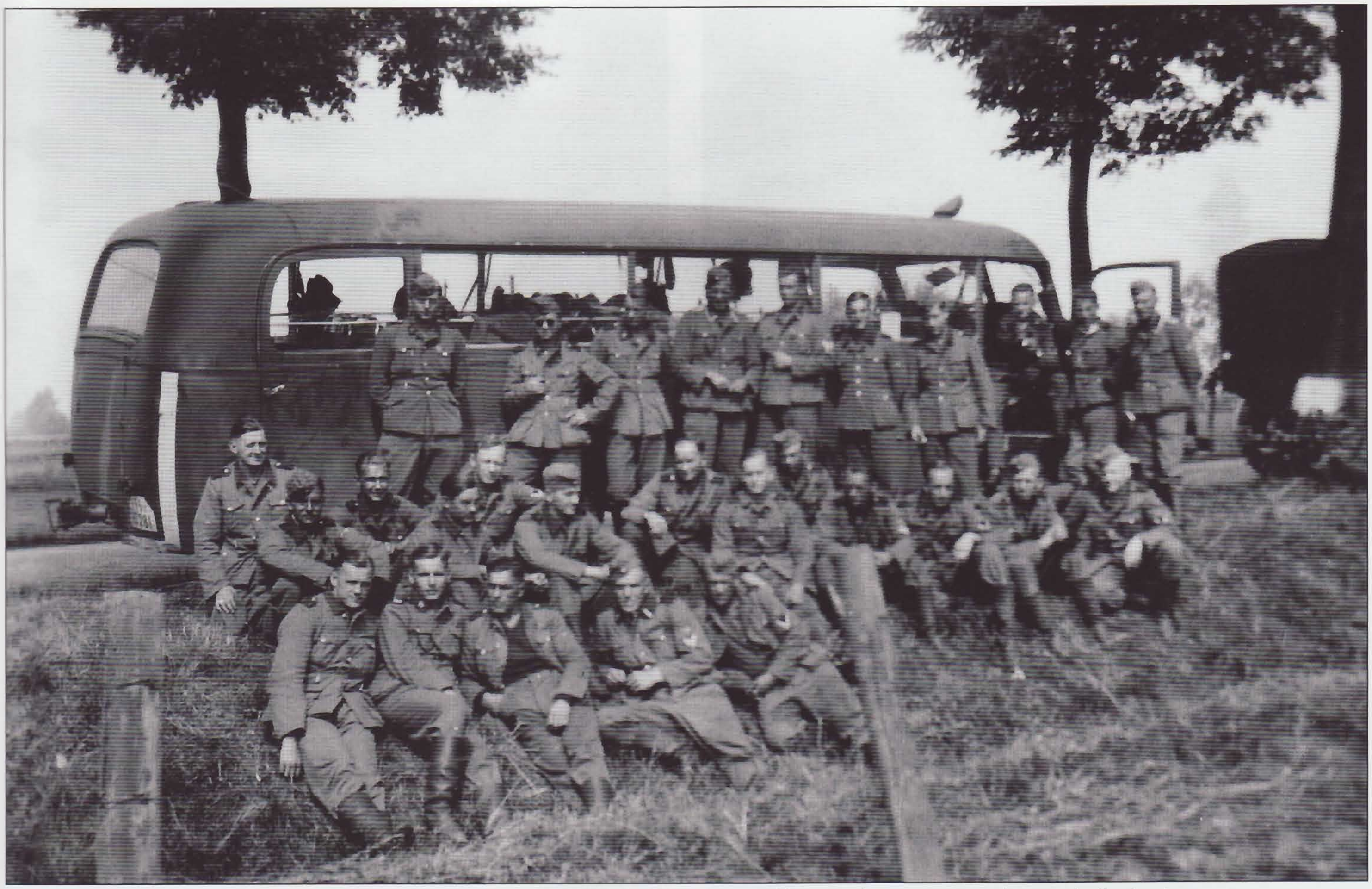
A "Das Reich" staff vehicle and motorcycle can be seen pulled up in a destroyed French town during operations in northern France in late May or early June. The staff car registration number plate is 'SS-10251'.



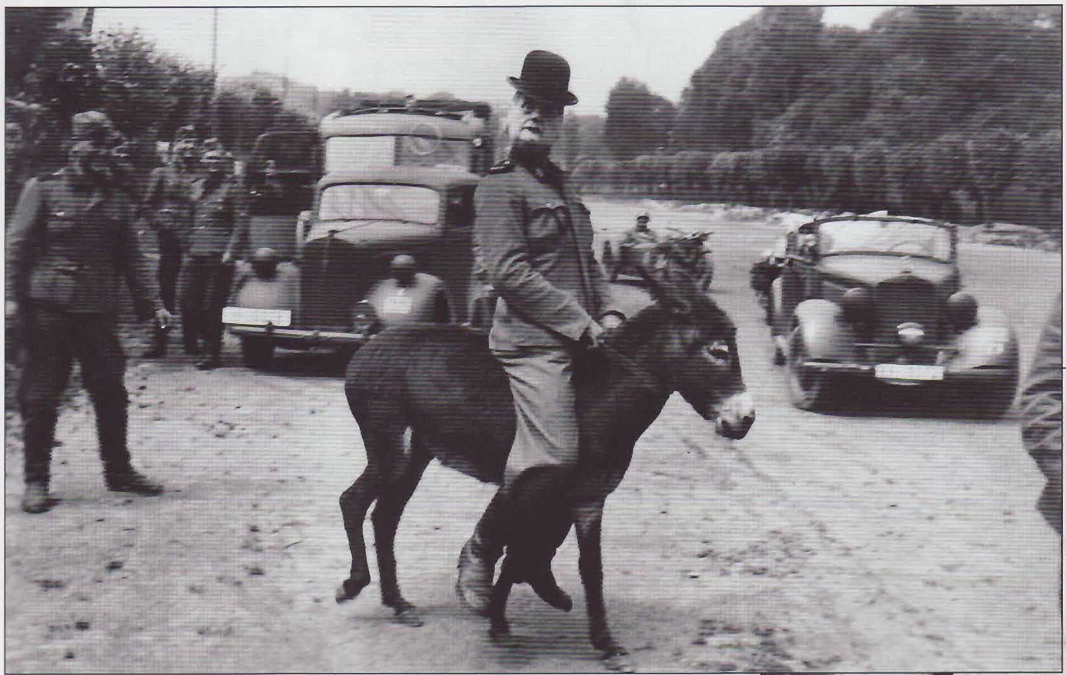
A "Das Reich" Sd.Kfz.7 towing a 10.5cm infantry gun across a pontoon bridge. In order to maintain the rapid advance pioneers were always looking for suitable sites in which to construct bridges. Many of the bridges were downed by the retreating French and the Luftwaffe too had destroyed many of the bridges in order to halt the escape of the French.

A howitzer battery in a field next to a village in northern France. Ready ammunition can be seen stacked on the ground. The 10.5cm howitzer had a wide selection of ammunition including high explosive, high explosive sabot (long-range), anti-tank hollow charge, anti-tank sabot (high velocity), incendiary, smoke, illumination (flare), and propaganda (leaflet dispersal).

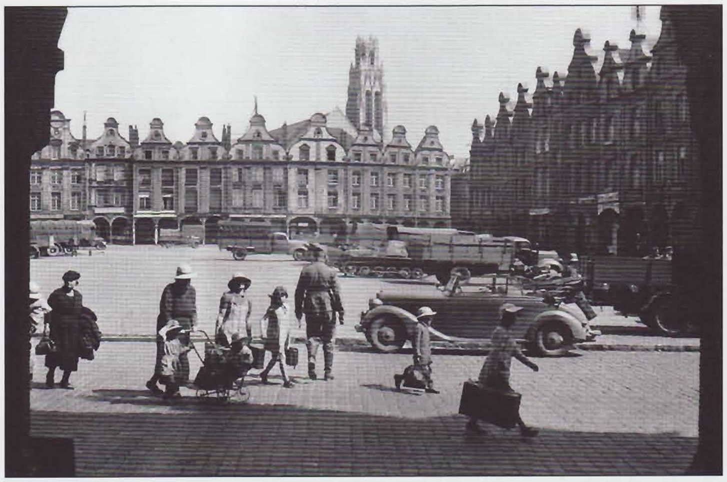
"Das Reich" medic takes care of wounded British prisoners in France. Altogether "Das Reich" captured no less than 20,000 POWs during its furious march across France.



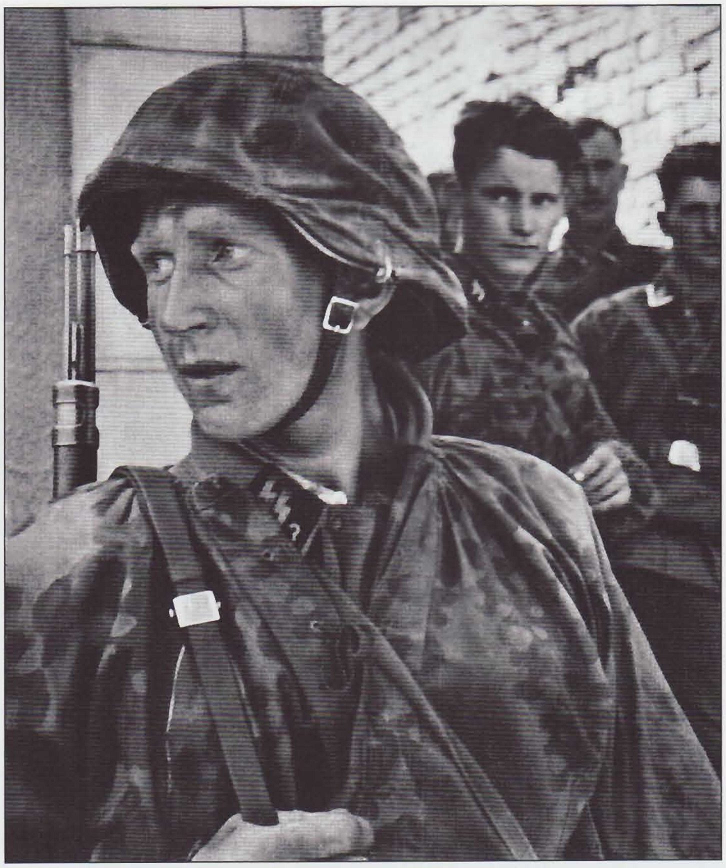
“Das Reich” soldiers pose for the camera in front of a civilian bus that has been pressed into service to transport the men to the front.



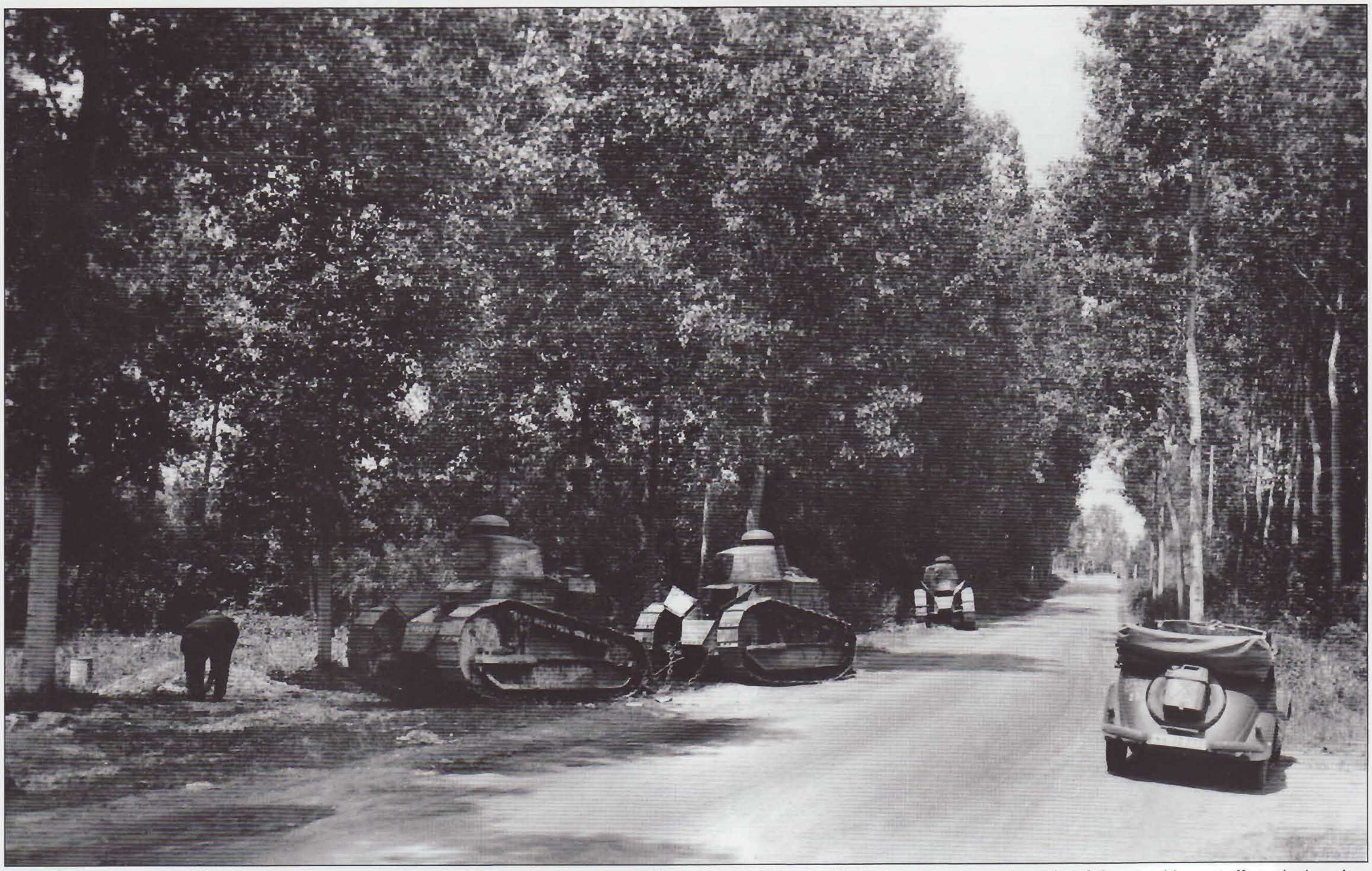
A pause in the march and SS troops have time for fun. Two photographs taken in sequence show a group of soldiers watching one of their comrades donned in a French mask riding a donkey. In the background are staff vehicles with SS registration plates and tactical markings indicating that it's attached to a bakery troop.



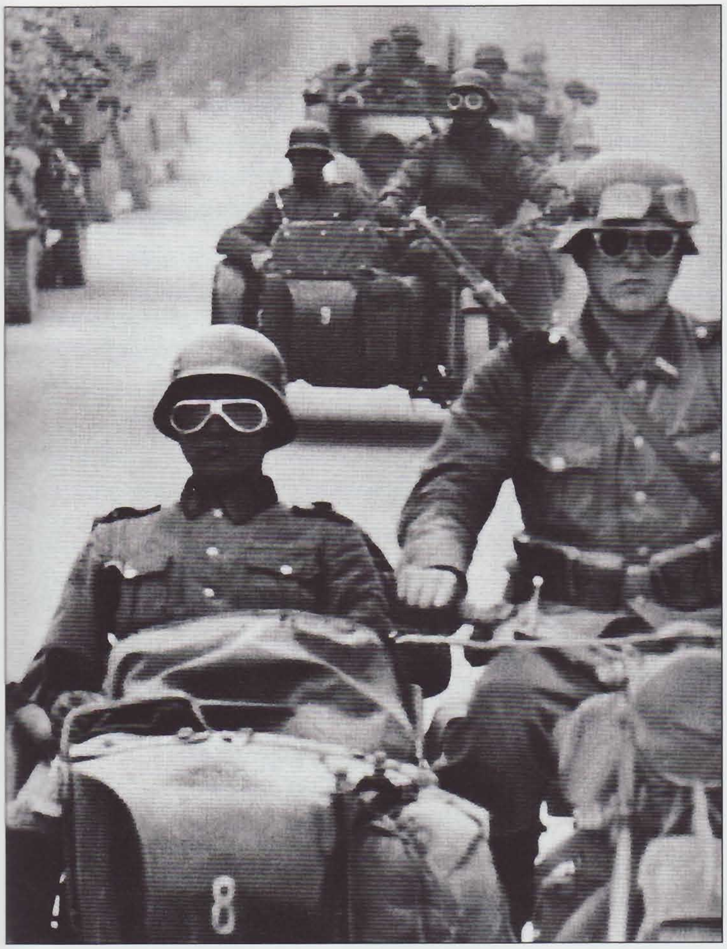
Divisional trucks and cars of "Das Reich" along with a variety of other vehicles from another division, including a Pz.Kpfw.I with staff markings of the II.Bataillon are all parked in a square in northern France.



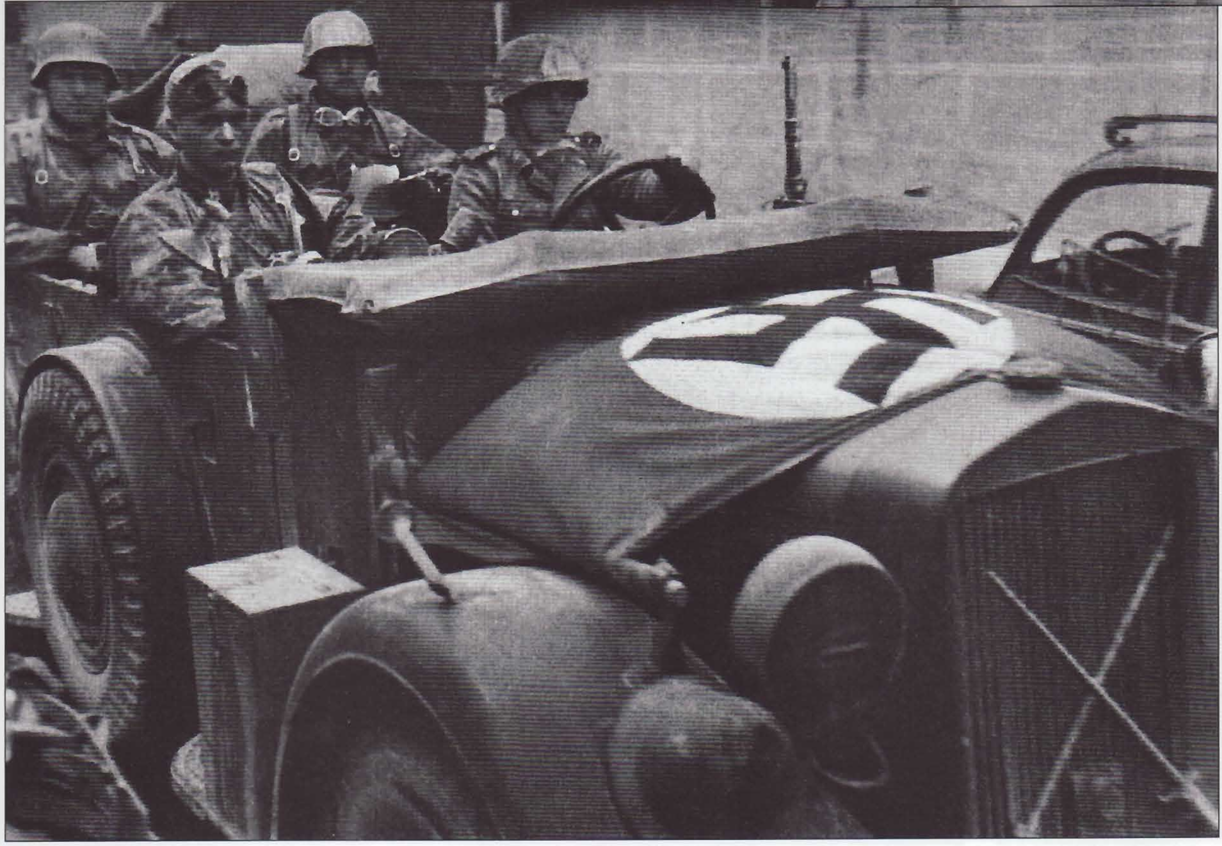
A group of "Der Führer" Regiment soldiers taking a short rest among some buildings in a French town. Note the camouflage smock and cover as well as the patch indicating that it's the 3.SS-Regiment in the "Das Reich" division. (RM collection)



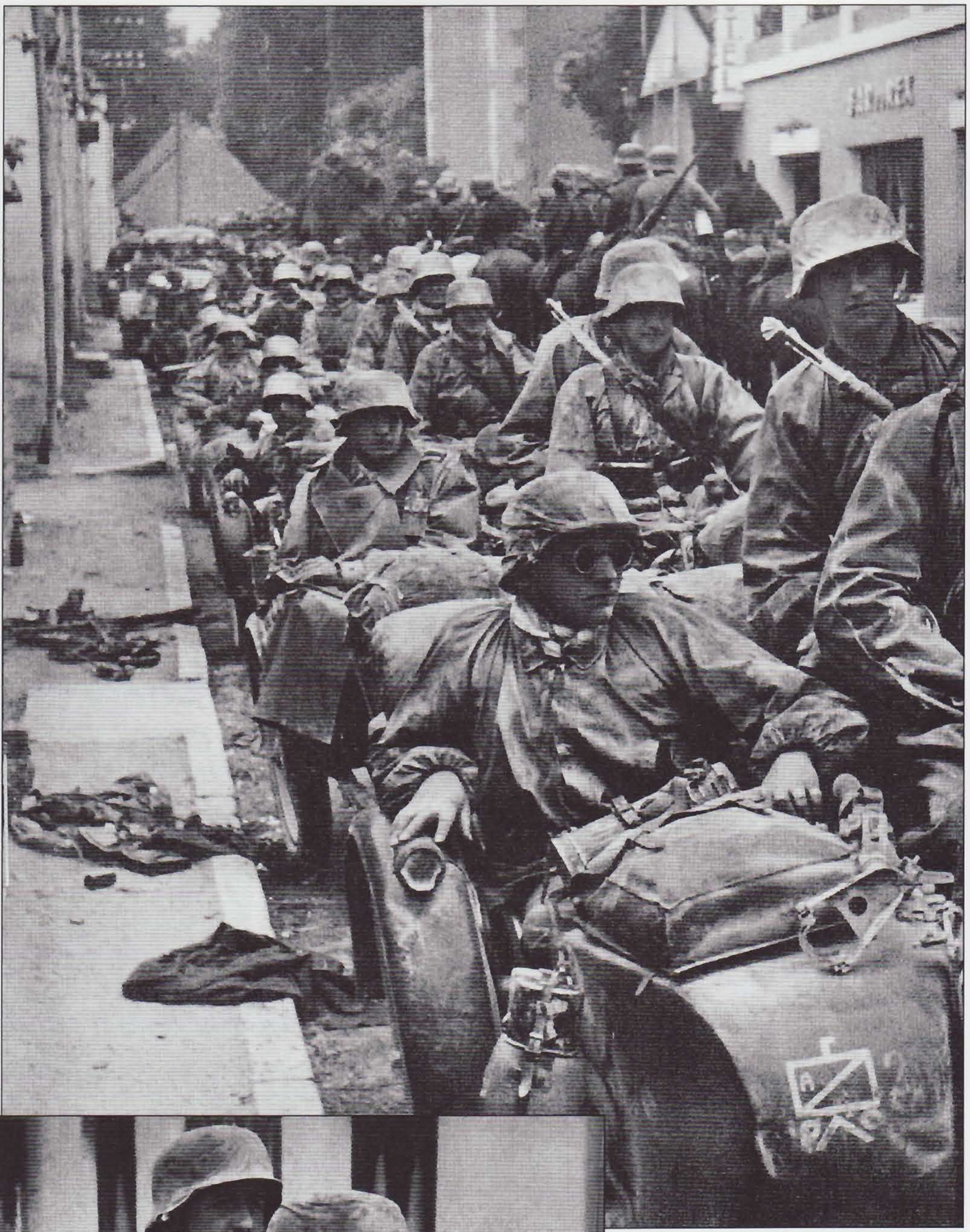
Three old Renault FT-17 tanks have been abandoned by its crew on a road in northern France. Halted on the opposite side of the road is a staff car belonging to a bakery company from "Das Reich" with tactical markings and number 23 painted beneath it. The registration number plate is SS-10272.



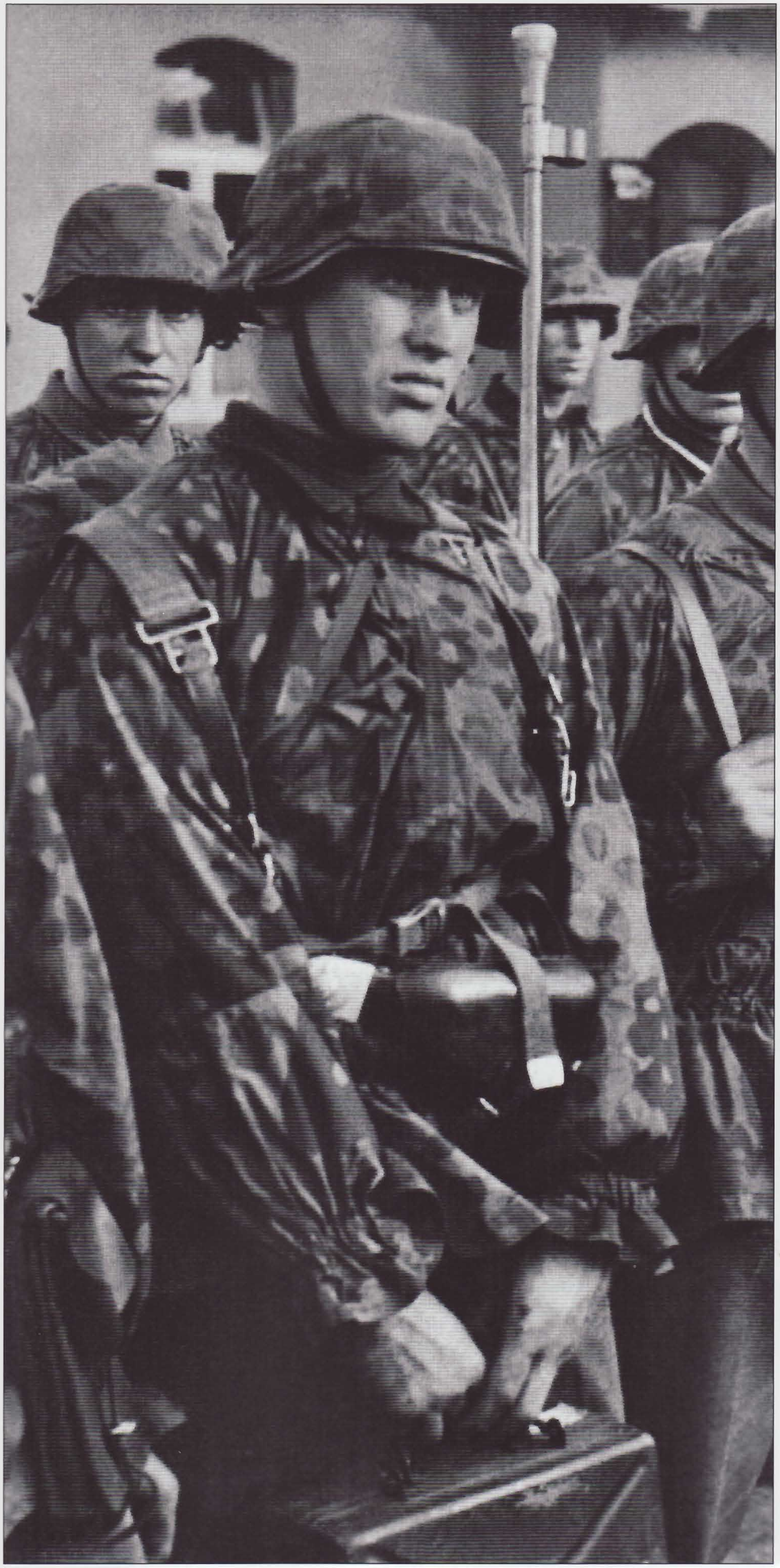
"Das Reich" motorcycle column traveling through France along a dusty road. These vehicles belong to "Germania's" Regiment. They are marked with a single number indicating the vehicles in a platoon, probably a reconnaissance platoon of the regiment, which normally composed of at least ten motorcycles, including two with sidecar combinations. (RM collection)



A heavy Horch Kfz.4 belonging to a reconnaissance battalion with a full complement of crew. Note the national flag draped over the vehicle's engine cover for aerial recognition purposes. Of interest is the two French bayonets attached to the front of the vehicle's radiator. (RM collection)

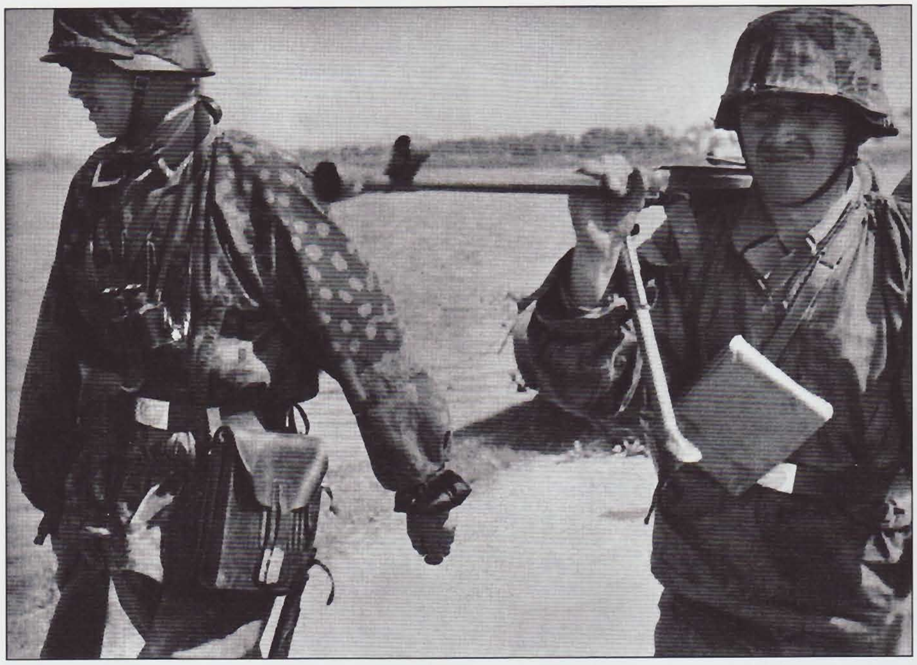


Two photographs showing a column of motorcycle combinations halted along a road inside a captured French town. The unit's tactical sign painted either in yellow or white on the sidecar combination indicates that it belongs to a machinegun platoon of the 2.Kompanie of a divisional reconnaissance motorized battalion. However, there are no machine guns, only a mount for the MG34 on the sidecar in the foreground is visible. (RM collection)

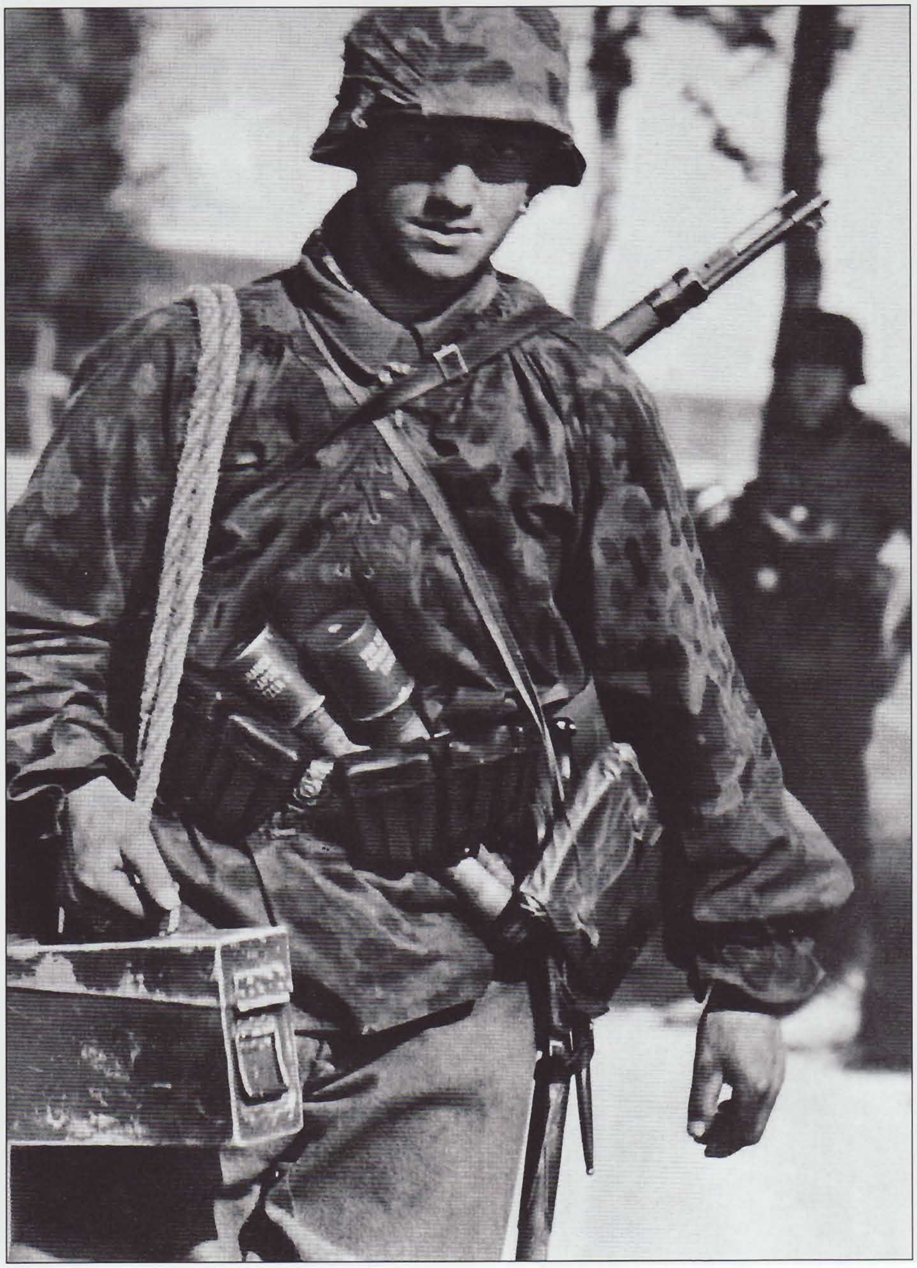


A group of "Das Reich" troops belonging to a heavy weapons platoon. Behind the soldier carrying an ammunition box is a PzB 39 anti-tank rifle (Panzerbüchse), which was a very rare piece of equipment used by the SS during this early period of the war. (RM collection)

Two photographs showing infantry and motorcycle troops halted during their advance whilst their commanding officer scrutinizes a map. The rapid advance of the German troops through France owed much to the excellent planning and the extensive use of good maps. Note the officer holding the rank of Sturmbannführer comparing his unit's notes with his map of north eastern France. (RM collection)

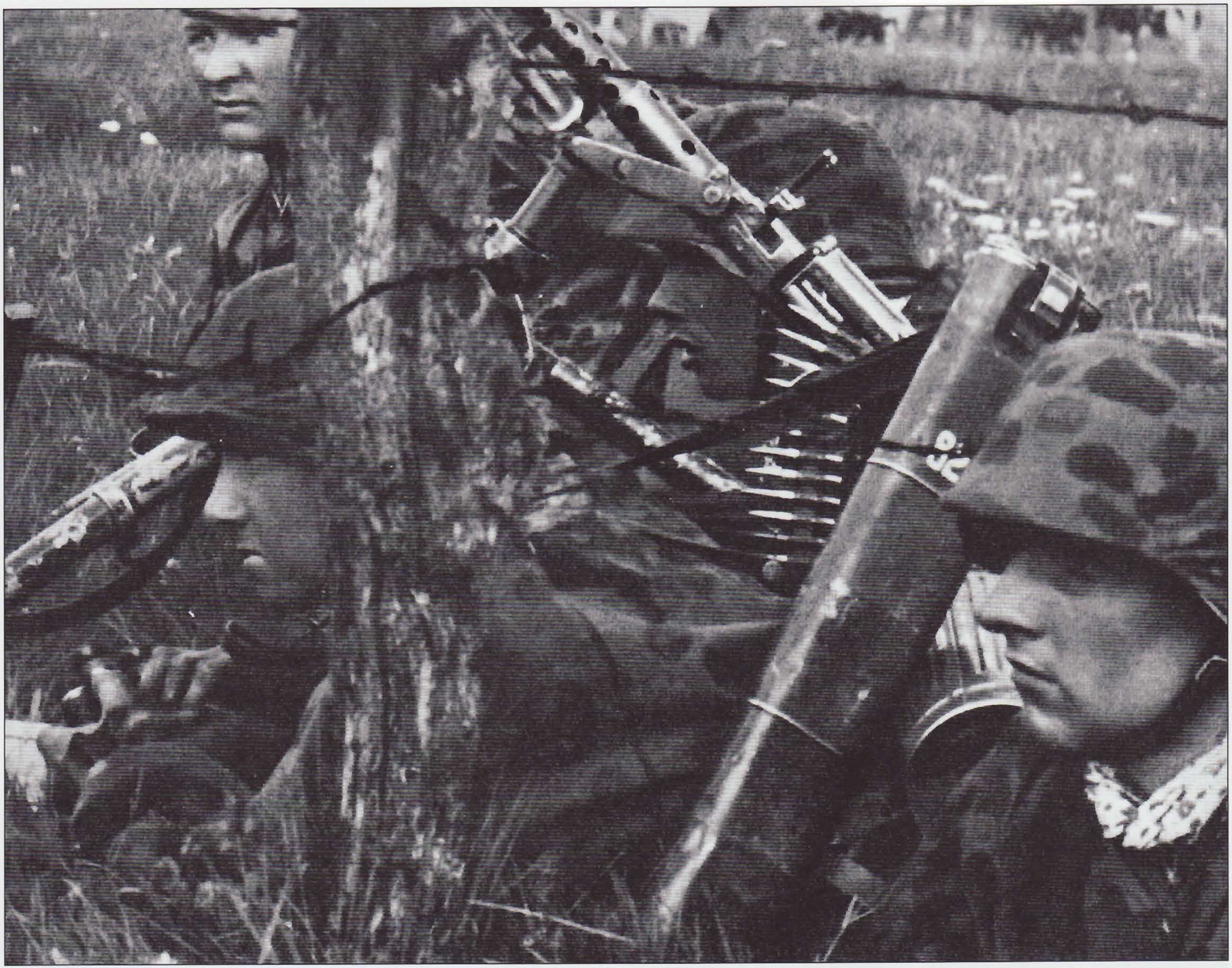


Another photograph of an SS soldier armed with the Panzerbüchse PzB 39 during a march with soldiers of an MG section. To increase the practical rate of fire, two cartridge-holding cases containing 10 rounds each could be attached to both sides of the PzB 39 near the breech - these were not magazines feeding the weapon, they simply enabled the gunner to extract the cartridges from the conveniently placed magazines. In total 568 PzB 39 were used by the German Army during the invasion of Poland, Low Countries, France and later during the beginning of the war against the Soviet Union. (RM collection)

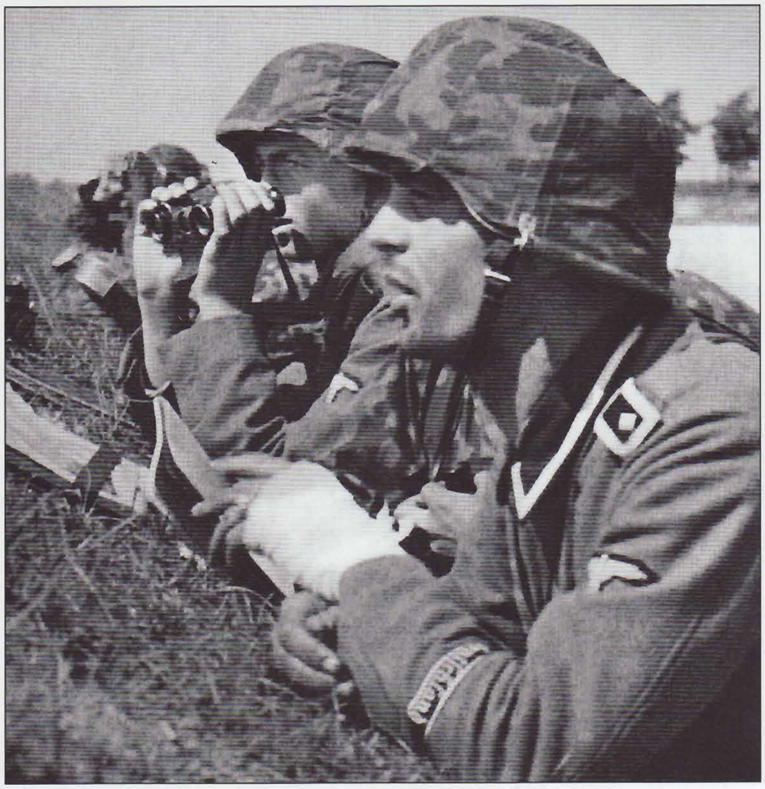


Three photographs taken in sequence showing soldiers of a heavy MG platoon during a march. Some of them are only armed with pistols and carrying heavy equipment on their backs, whilst others can be seen carrying ammunition boxes and are armed with the standard Karabiner 98k rifle. (RM collection)

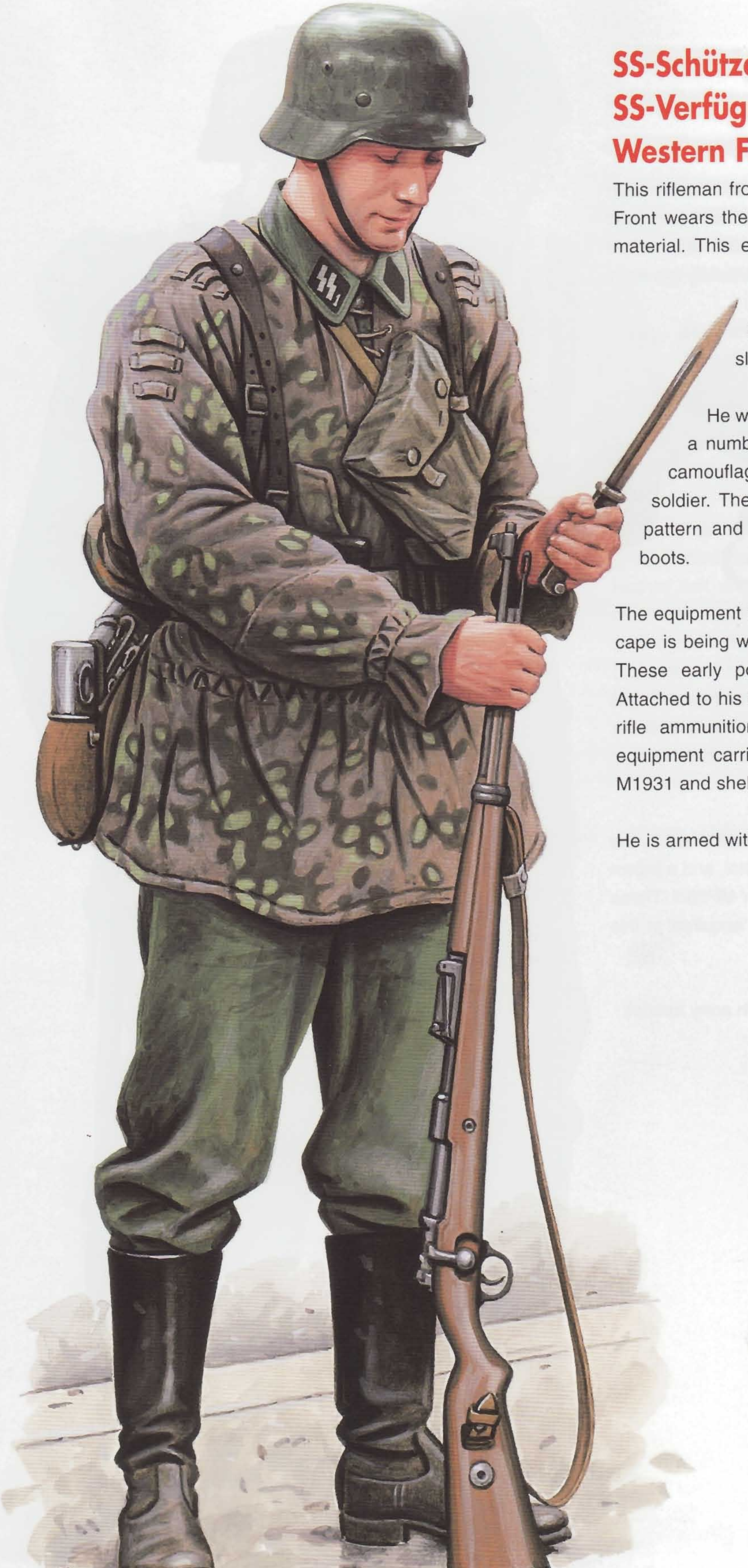
Two photographs showing a heavy MG34 machine gun section that has set up their MG on a tripod mount. The MG34 was an excellent weapon, and along the front lines enemy soldiers had great respect for the German machine gun and their highly trained crews. (RM collection)



A heavy MG34 team preparing their weapon for action. Note the very rare barrel tube for the weapon's two spare barrels. The fire power of the German Army, including the SS, was one of the important factors in overwhelming French and British forces. (RM collection)



At an MG34 machine gun position a group of NCOs survey the terrain for enemy movement. Note the soldier displaying his "Deutschland" armband, SS eagle and NCO insignia on his collar and shoulder straps. (RM collection)



SS-Schütze, "Deutschland" Regiment, SS-Verfügungstruppe, Western Front, 1940

This rifleman from the "Deutschland" Regiment on the Western Front wears the M1938 type camouflage smock in 'plane tree' material. This early smock is being worn over the personal equipment and is gathered around the waist by an elastic waist band. Access to the equipment beneath the smock was by two vertical access slits.

He wears a slate gray M1935 steel helmet, and unlike a number of the SS during this period of the war the camouflage helmet cover has not been distributed to this soldier. The uniform is the standard early war field gray pattern and his trousers are tucked into his black leather boots.

The equipment is that of a typical German infantryman. His gas cape is being worn on the web strap of the gas mask canister. These early pouches were made from rubberized canvas. Attached to his black leather enlisted infantryman's belt are two rifle ammunition pouches, and a M1931 field flask. Other equipment carried would be the M1931 bread bag, mess kit M1931 and shelter quarter (Zeltbahn).

He is armed with the standard Karabiner 98k.

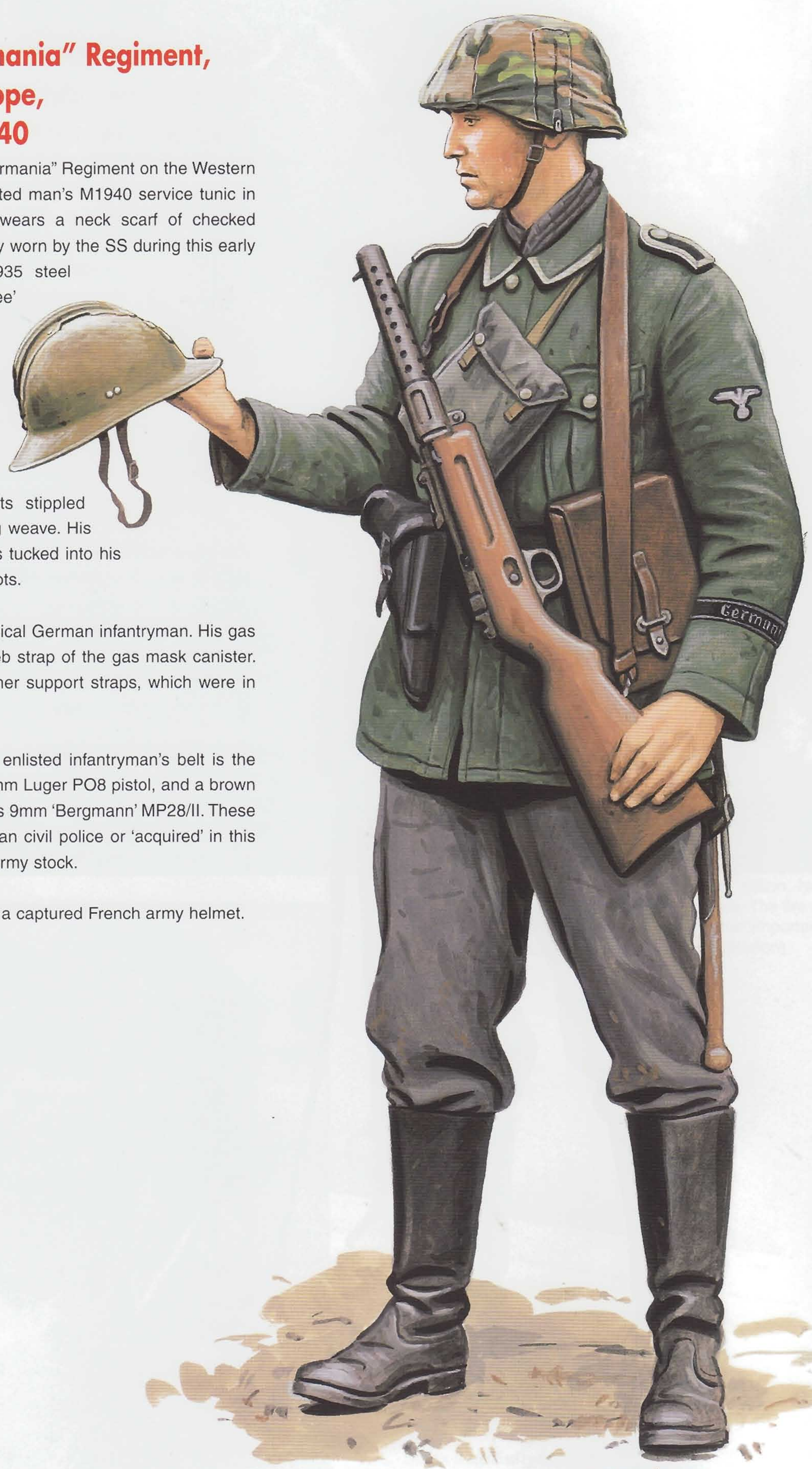
SS-Schütze, "Germania" Regiment, SS-Verfügungstruppe, Western Front, 1940

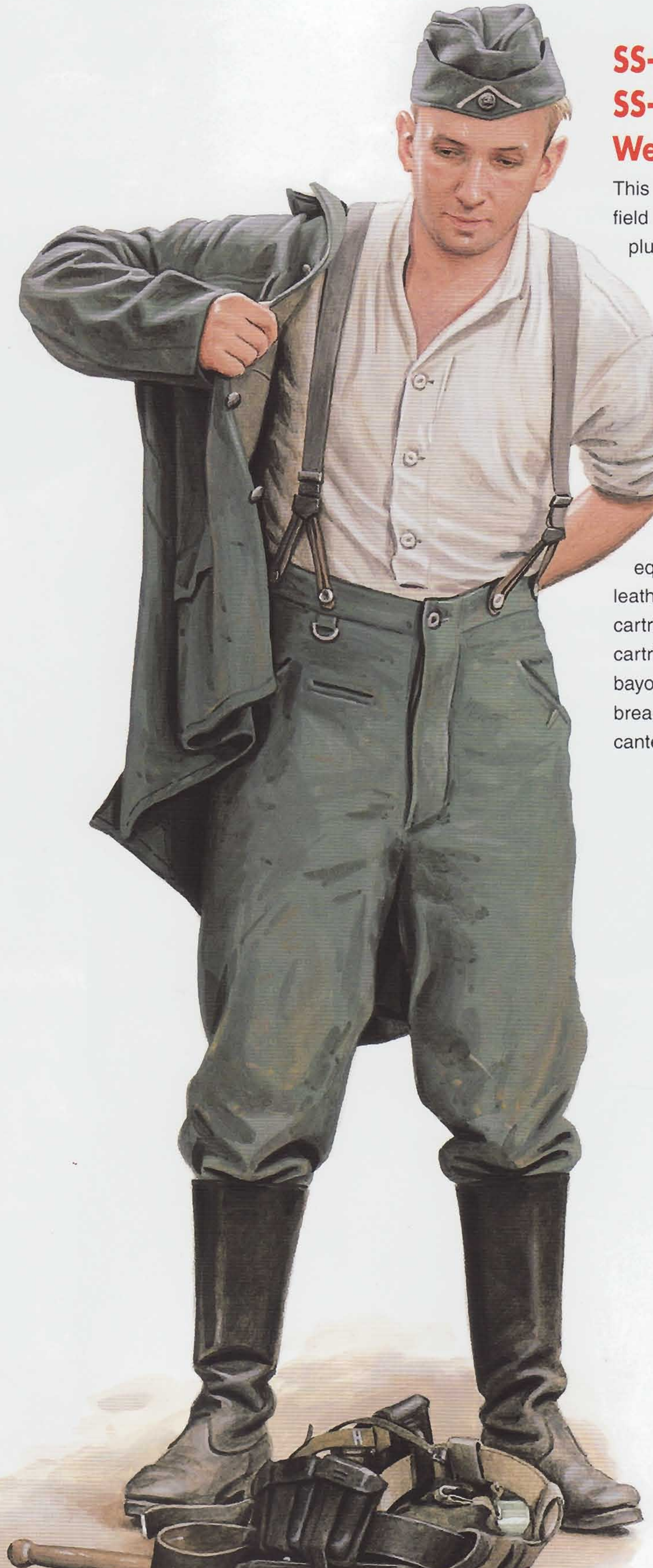
This infantryman from the "Germania" Regiment on the Western Front in 1940 wears the enlisted man's M1940 service tunic in the standard field gray. He wears a neck scarf of checked material, which was commonly worn by the SS during this early period of the war. His M1935 steel helmet cover is of 'plane tree' camouflage, which was identical to the early smocks originally intended to be worn over his field gray tunic (Feldbluse) and personal equipment. On his left sleeve he displays the "Germania" cuff title, with its stippled lettering and simple bordering weave. His standard dark gray trousers is tucked into his tall black leather marching boots.

The equipment is that of a typical German infantryman. His gas cape is being worn on the web strap of the gas mask canister. Note the absence of the leather support straps, which were in limited issue in 1940.

Attached to his black leather enlisted infantryman's belt is the black leather holster for his 9mm Luger PO8 pistol, and a brown leather magazine pouch for his 9mm 'Bergmann' MP28/II. These were supplied from the German civil police or 'acquired' in this case from captured Belgium army stock.

In his right hand he is holding a captured French army helmet.





SS-Schütze, "Der Führer" Regiment, SS-Verfügungstruppe, Western Front, 1940

This rifleman (Schütze) is outfitted in the M36 field uniform with field gray tunic (Feldbluse) and stone gray trousers (Feldhose) plus the M38 field cap (Feldmütze) known as the little Schiffchenmütze (little boat cap).

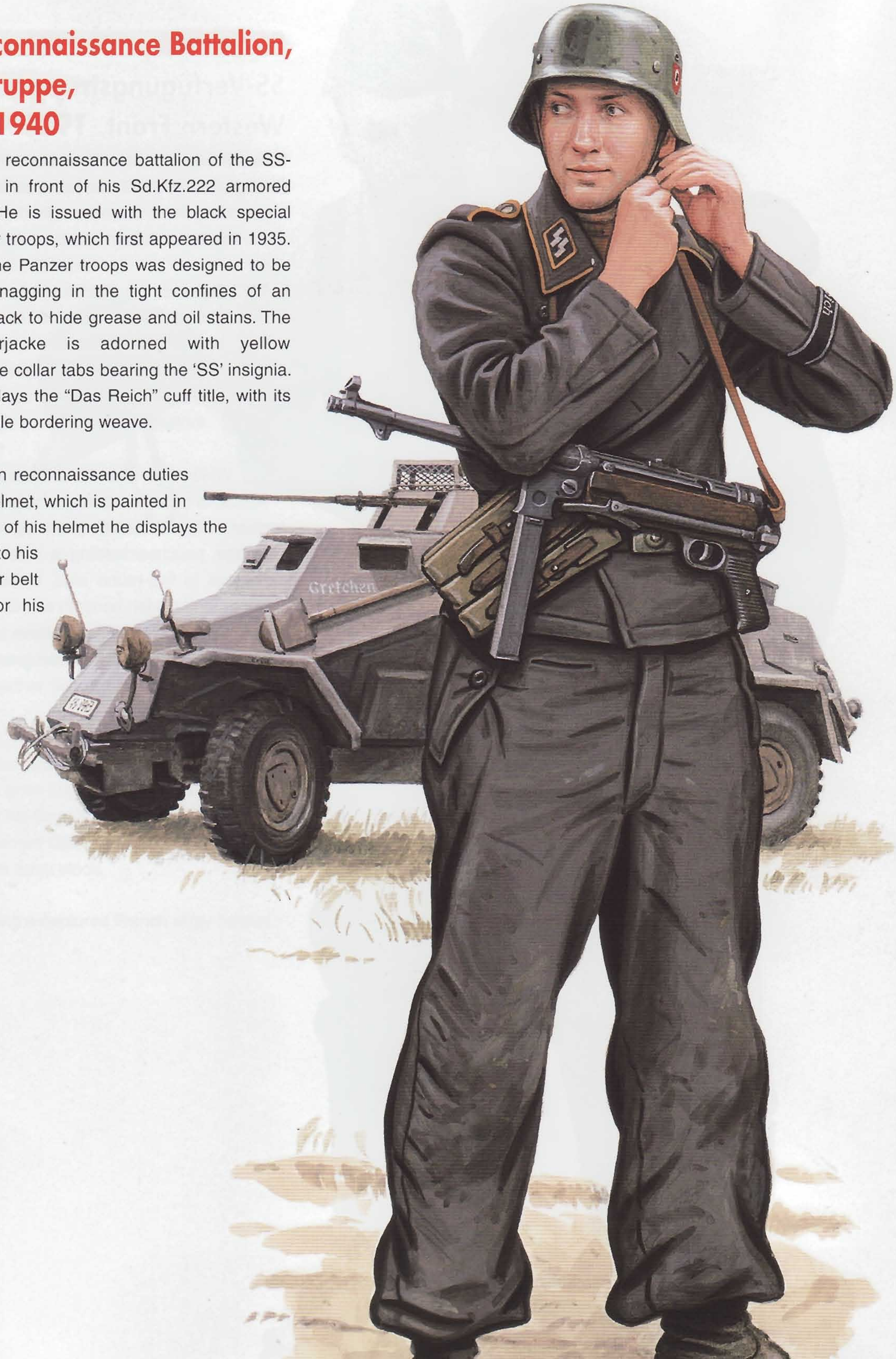
Beneath his Feldbluse he wears white cotton 'Long-Johns', which were worn at all times beneath the uniform. His Feldhose are being held in place by a pair of braces and are tucked into his high leather black marching boots, which remained the standard footwear until 1942.

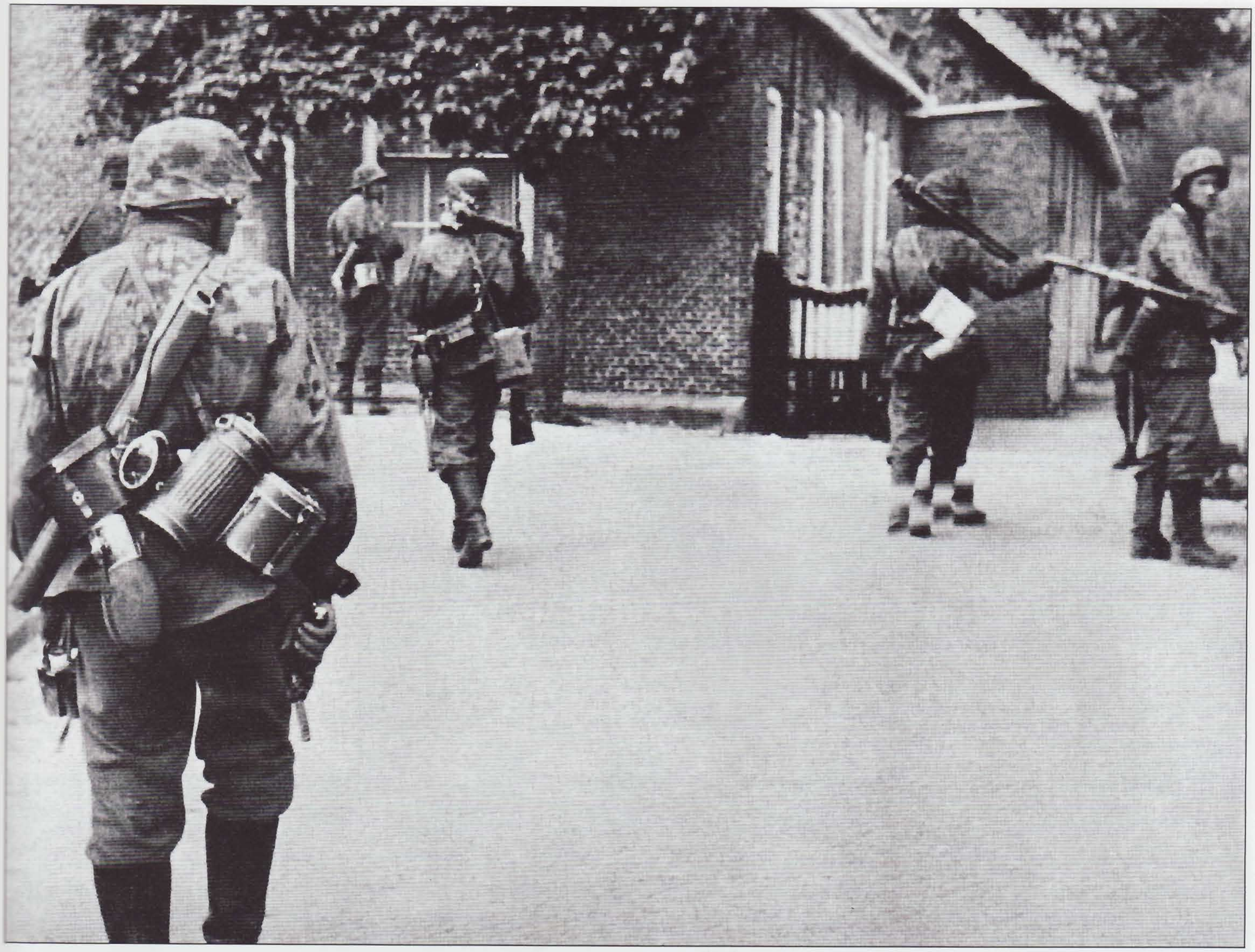
Whilst this rifleman dresses, his set of individual field equipment can be seen on the ground. It consists of a brown leather belt and buckle, belt support straps, two three-pocket cartridge pouches holding a total of 60 rounds of 7.9mm cartridges in five-round clips, small entrenching tool, S84/98 bayonet, and hidden beneath all this equipment appears to be a bread bag that contained rations and small personal items, canteen or field flask and drinking cup.

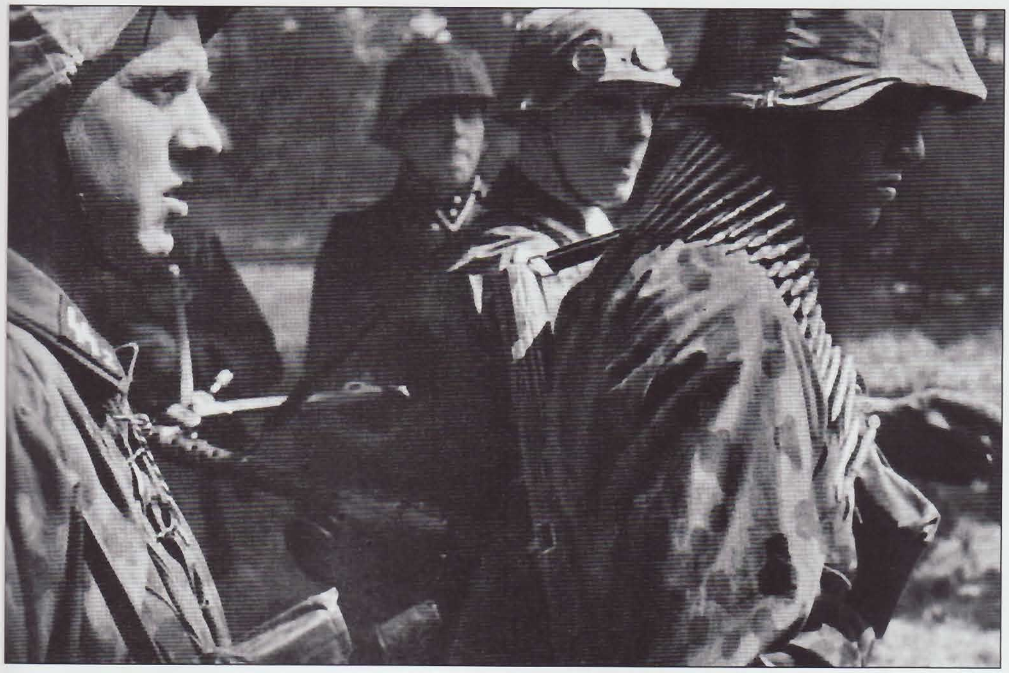
"Das Reich" Reconnaissance Battalion, SS-Verfügungstruppe, Western Front, 1940

This NCO belonging to a reconnaissance battalion of the SS-Verfügungstruppe stands in front of his Sd.Kfz.222 armored reconnaissance vehicle. He is issued with the black special uniform for German armor troops, which first appeared in 1935. The special clothing for the Panzer troops was designed to be close fitting to prevent snagging in the tight confines of an armored vehicle and in black to hide grease and oil stains. The double-breasted Panzerjacke is adorned with yellow Waffenfarbe, along with the collar tabs bearing the 'SS' insignia. On his left sleeve he displays the "Das Reich" cuff title, with its stippled lettering and simple bordering weave.

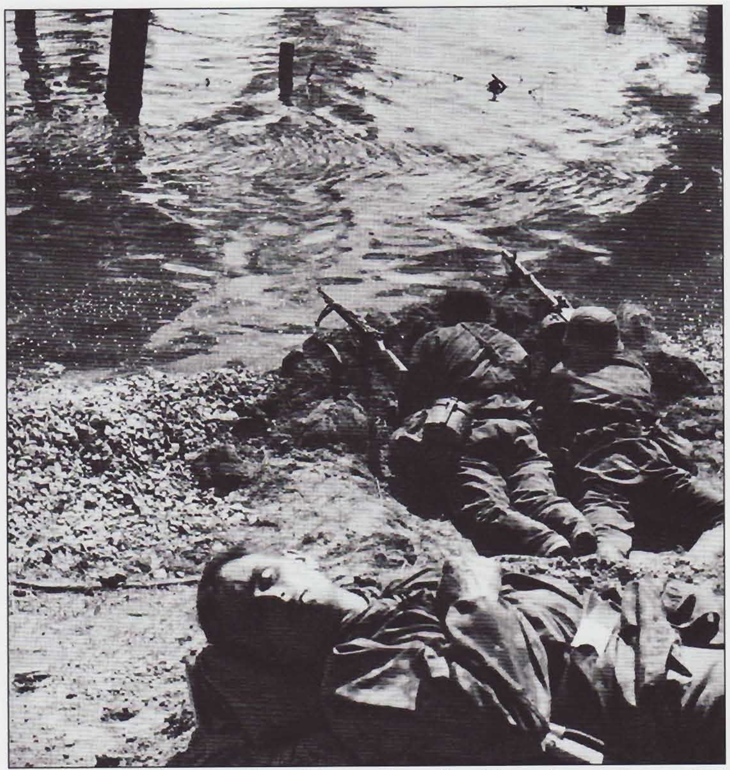
For his headgear whilst on reconnaissance duties he wears the M35 steel helmet, which is painted in slate gray. On the left side of his helmet he displays the 'SS' rune decal. Attached to his infantryman's black leather belt is a magazine pouch for his 9mm MP40.



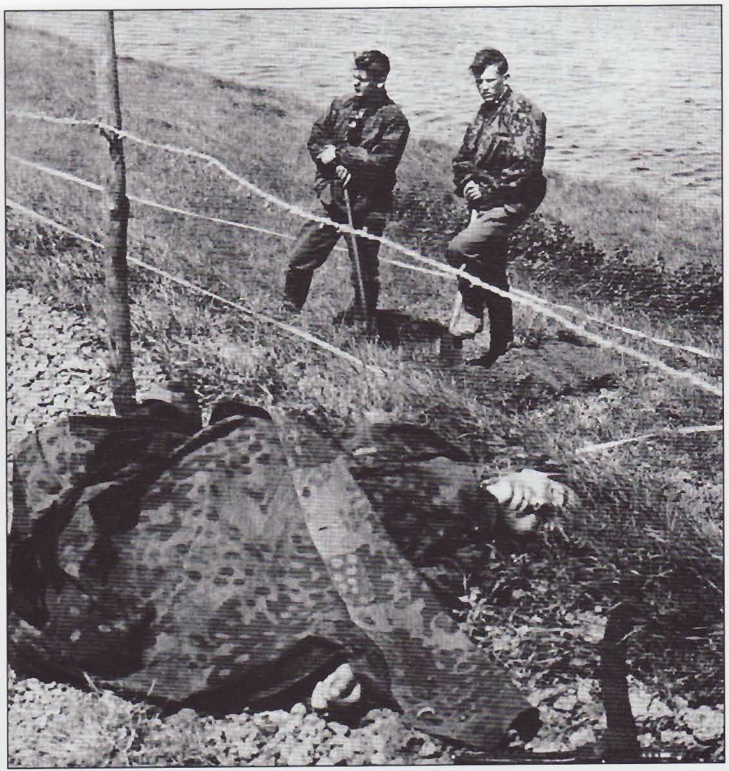




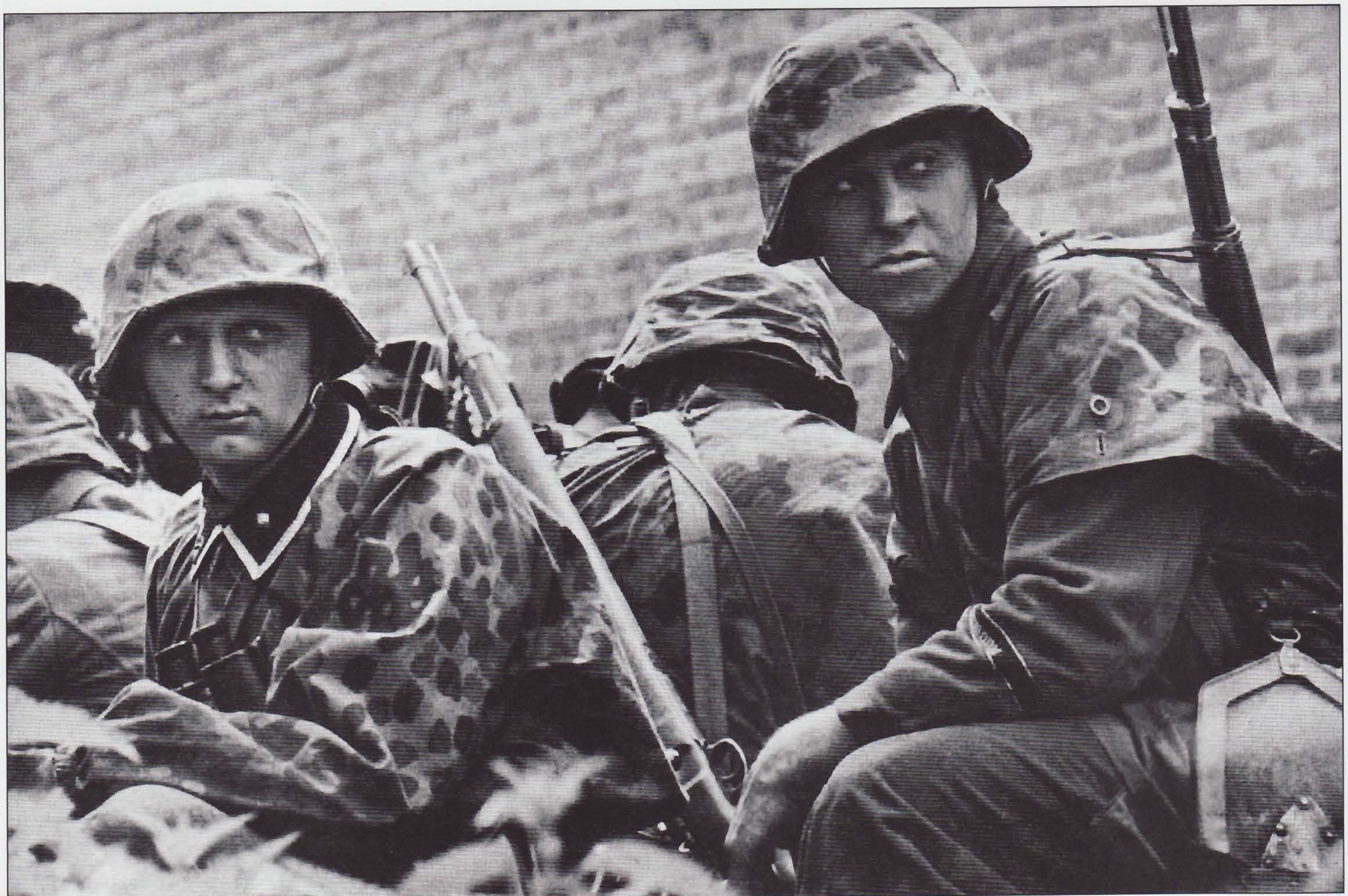
Two photographs show a heavy MG troop entering a village. The soldiers are equipped with goggles, indicating that they belong to a motorcycle unit. Each soldier carries a variety of personal field equipment, tripod, spare barrel tubes, the Dreifuss 34 mount and MG34 machine gun. (RM collection)



An MG34 team have positioned themselves at a side of river during a lull in the fighting. One of their comrades can be seen taking a midday nap in the sun. When facing a German machine gun team supplied with plenty of ammunition, enemy units had a difficult time, especially since their own supply was often inadequate. (RM collection)

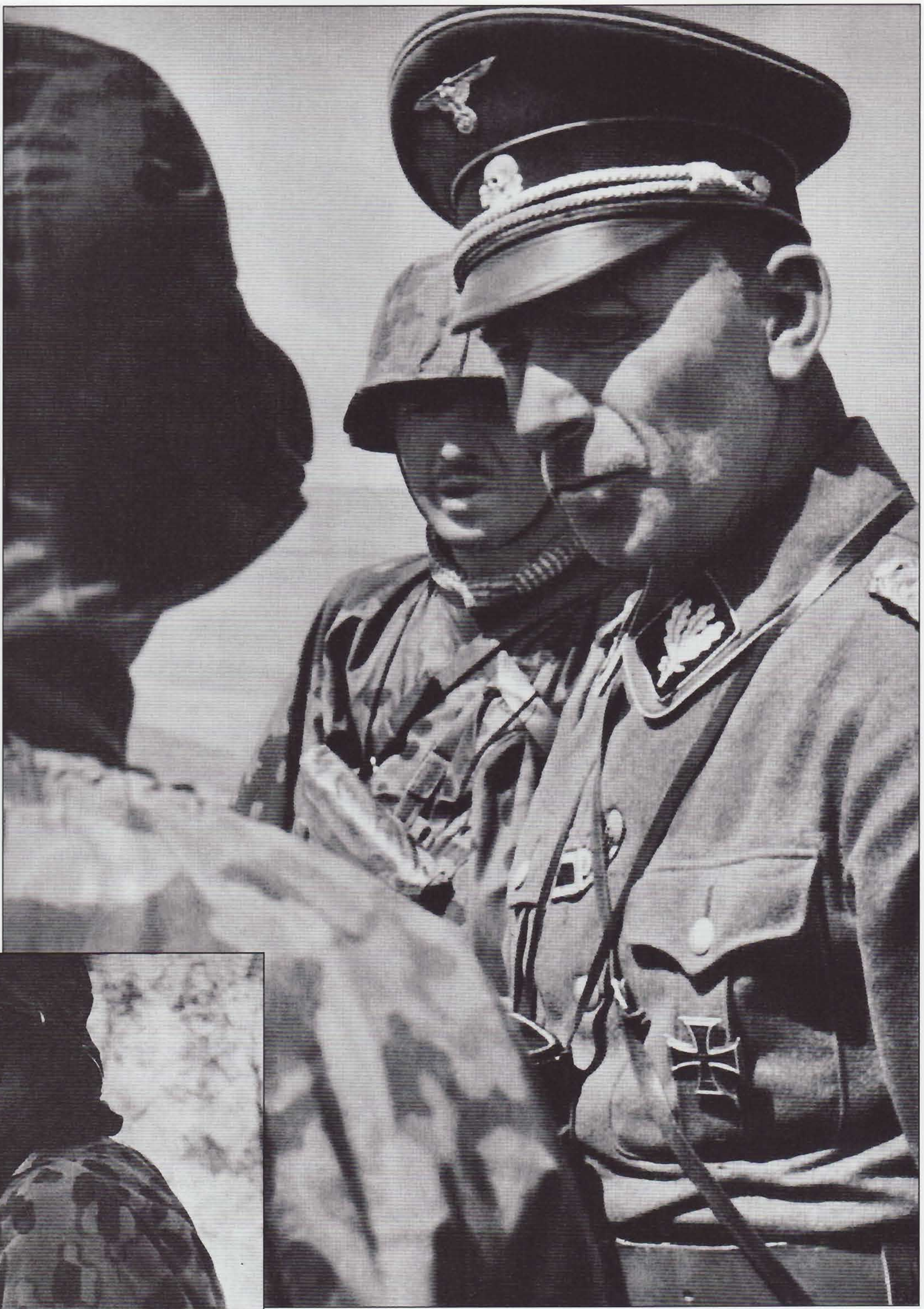


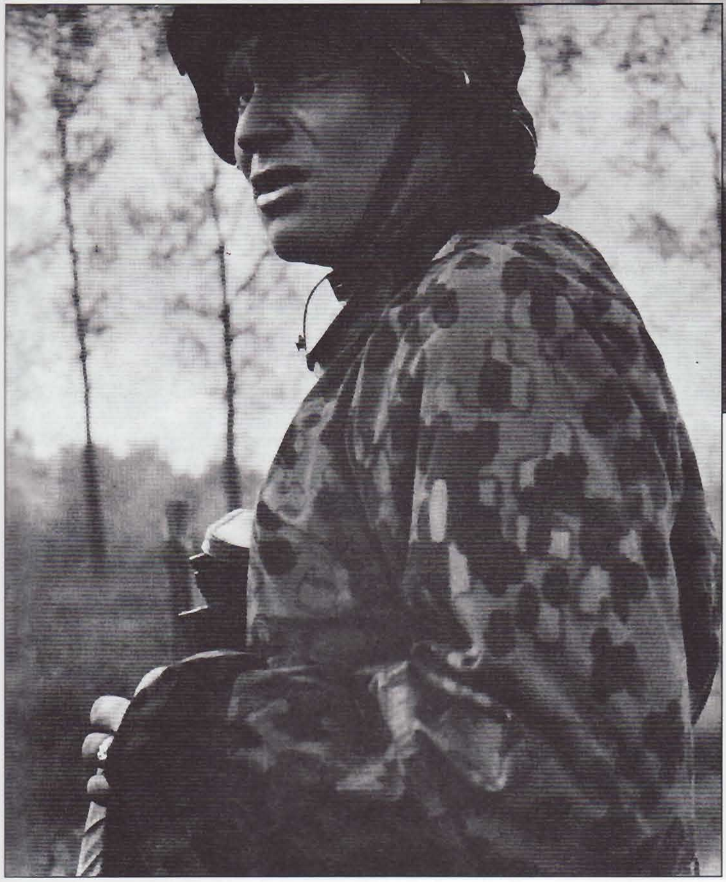
Two "Das Reich" soldiers dig a grave for a fallen comrade covered with a Zeltbahn printed in the "plane tree" pattern. This personal protective cover that was issued to each soldier in the SS was identical to the one supplied to the Heer. The print only differed when it was printed in a different factory. (RM collection)



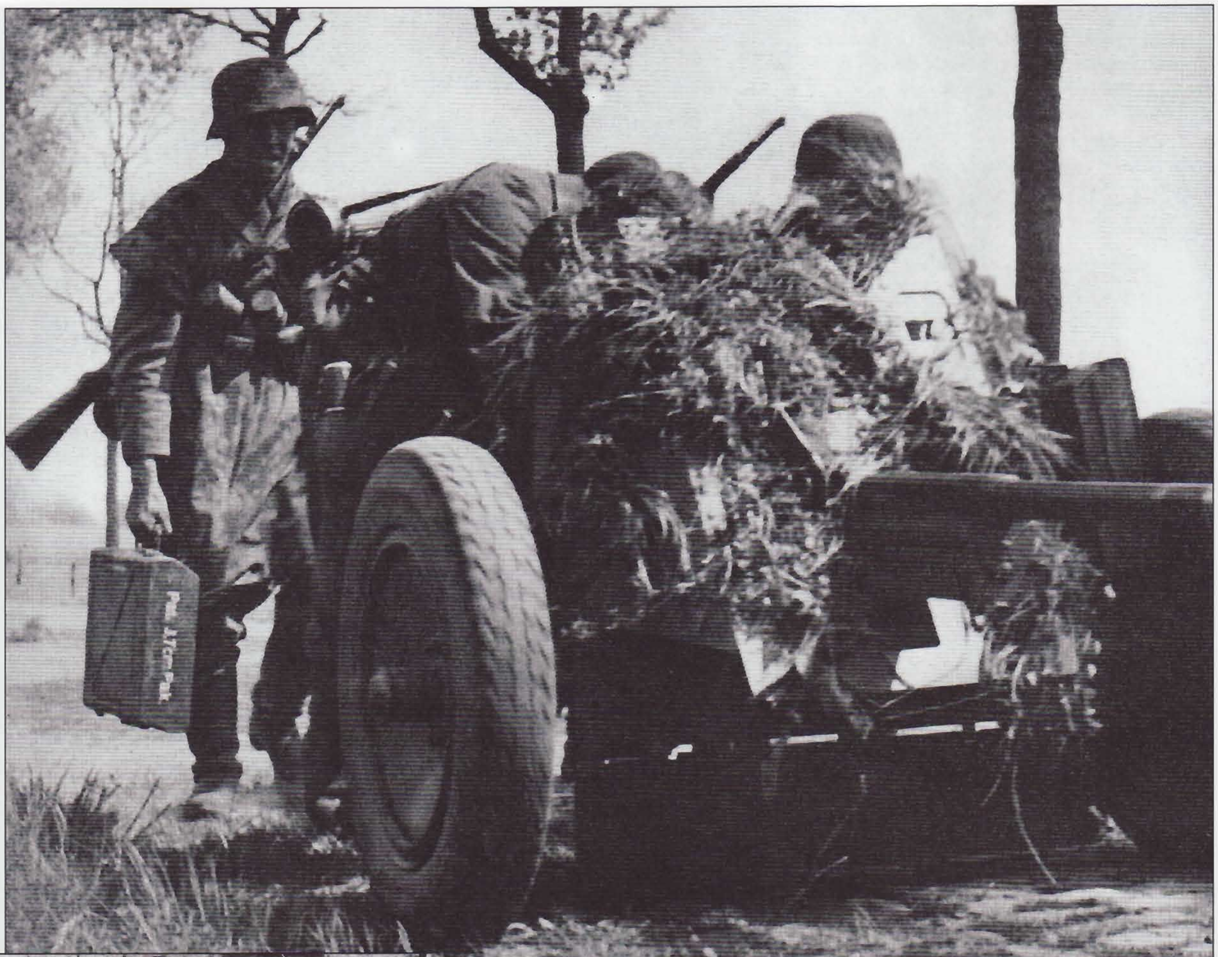
Close up photograph of SS troops preparing for action. The soldier on the left carries the NCO collar patches which are placed over his camouflage smock, whilst his comrade on the right is wearing a camouflaged Zeltbahn over his Feldgrau uniform. Note his armband with the inscription "Germania" visible on his left sleeve. (RM collection)

SS-Gruppenführer Paul Hauser, commander of the "Das Reich" division, is seen inspecting his troops during a break in the fighting. The SS rank patch is clearly visible on his uniform collar, and the first class Iron Cross can be seen pinned to his left tunic breast. (RM collection)

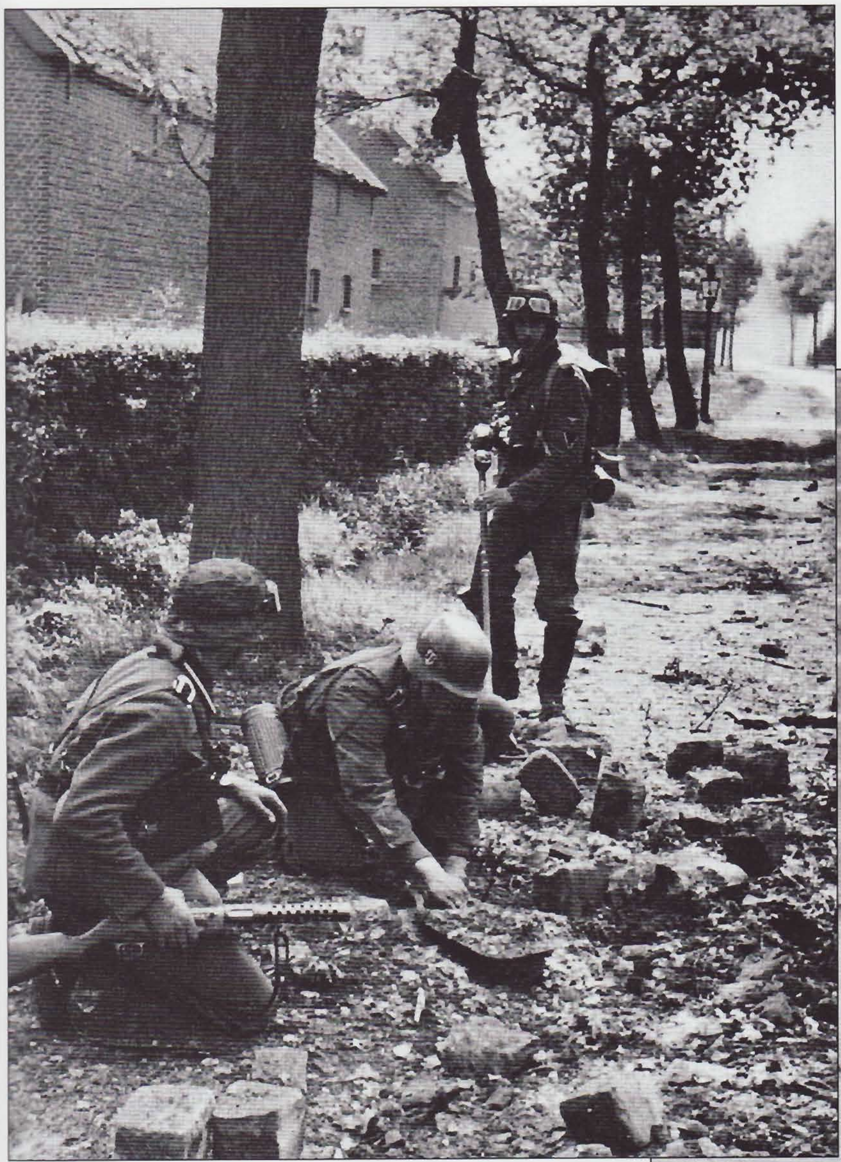




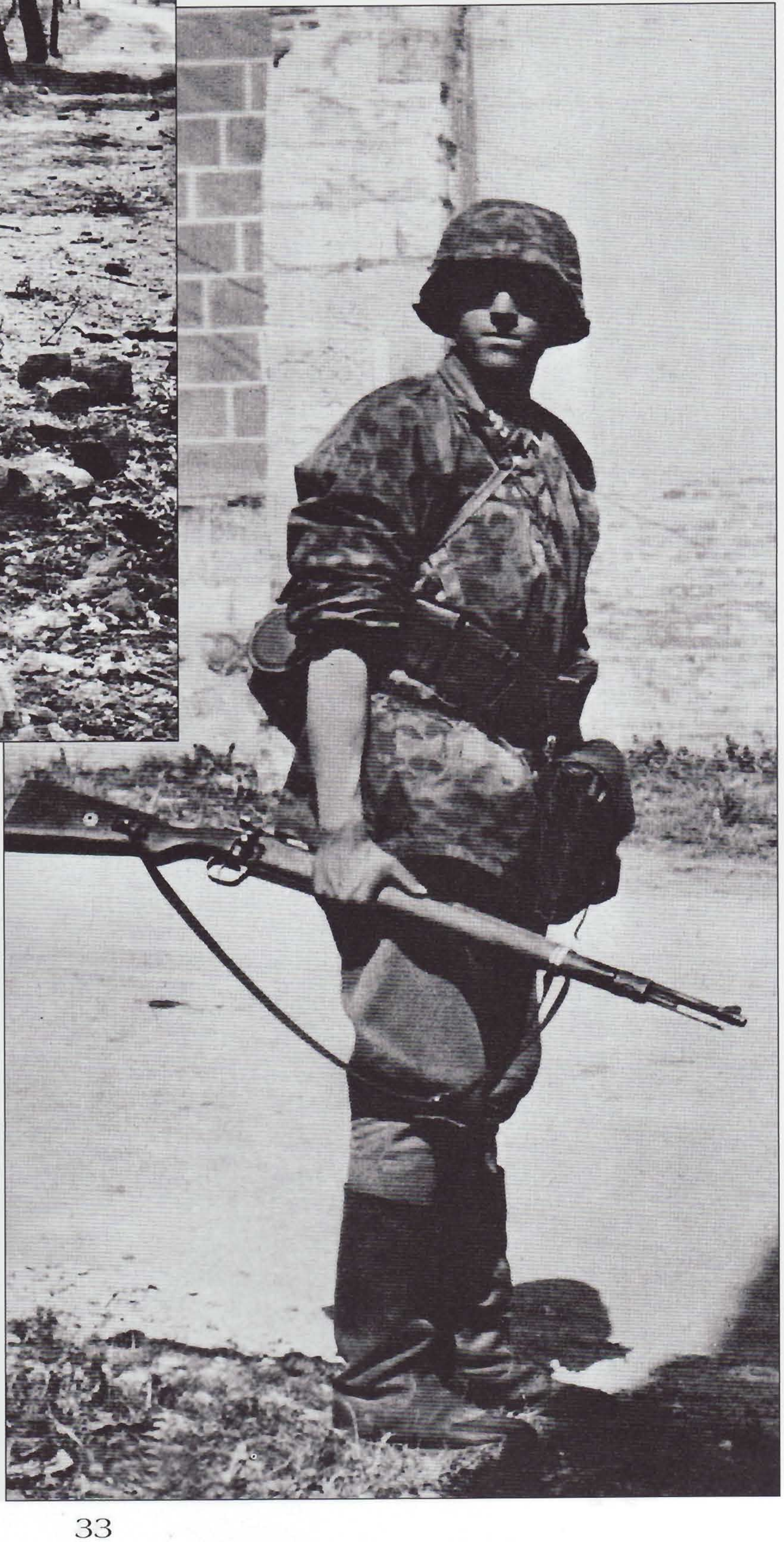
An NCO photographed wearing a rare early version of the "plane tree" camouflage smock, which was printed during 1939. By late 1940 this camouflage pattern disappeared among the ranks of the SS. (RM collection)



Three photographs showing a PaK35/36 team of the 2.SS-Regiment "Germania" preparing their anti-tank gun for action. The weapon's splinter shield is well camouflaged with foliage. Note the ammunition carrier and the ammunition box with the inscription painted in white which reads "Pat. 3.7cm Pak" – Rounds [Patronen] 3.7cm for anti-tank gun. Two of the soldiers are manhandling the gun's trail spades in order to reduce the guns recoil as it fires on a cobbled road. (RM collection)

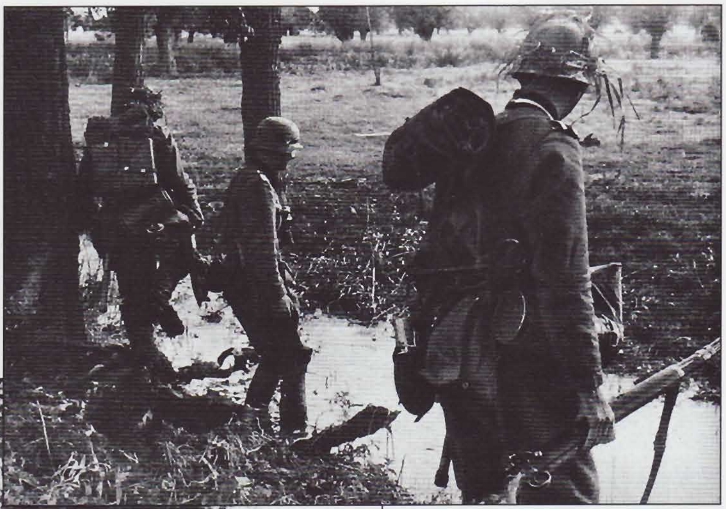


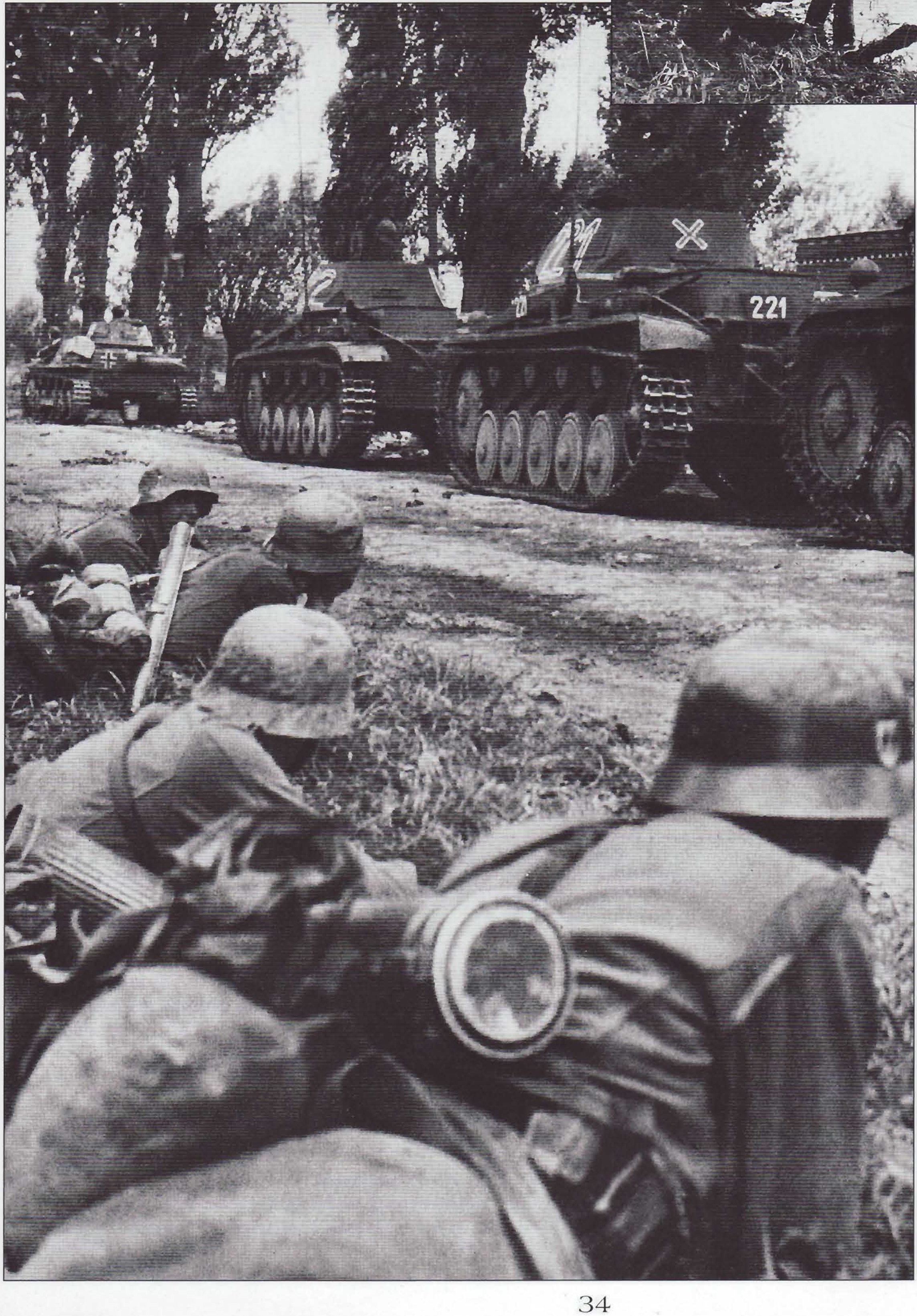
A motorcycle pioneer platoon removing mines from a road. The soldier in the background, watching the work being carried out is equipped with a knapsack mine-detector, which was still a very rare piece of equipment at the time. Note the NCO on the left armed with a 9mm 'Bergmann' MP28 machine pistol which were mainly issued to troop commanders in the field. (RM collection)



A photograph of a "Das Reich" NCO from the "Der Führer" Regiment armed with Kar98k rifle and equipped with officers' bag. (RM collection)

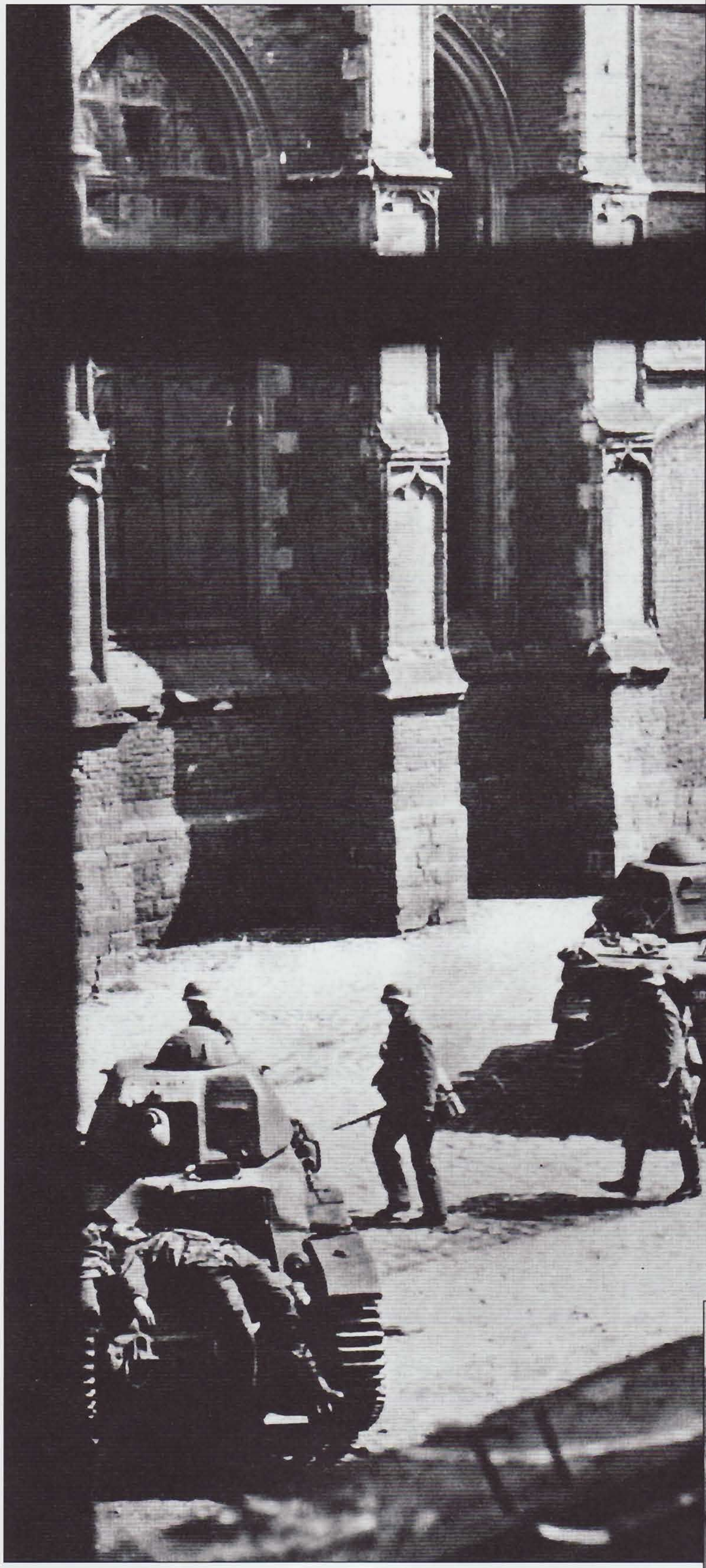
Heavy equipped soldiers of an infantry platoon cross a stream. Thanks to their initiative and zeal, the troops managed to negotiate the many watery obstacles that covered northern France. (RM collection)



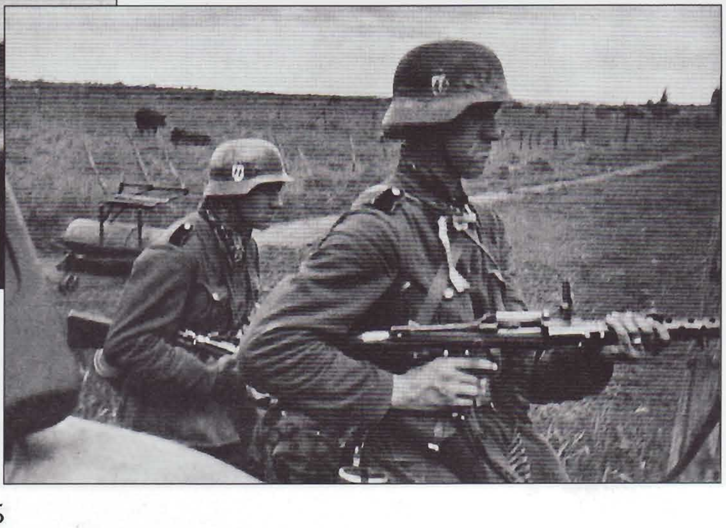


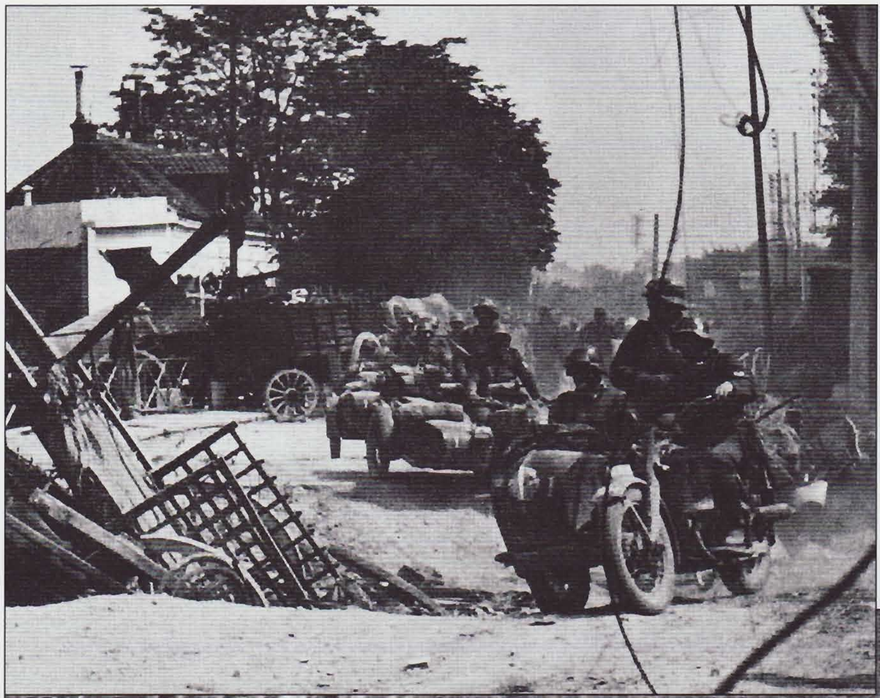
From the side of a road SS soldiers watch a column of Pz.Kpfw.I and II tanks probably from the 3.Panzer-Division preparing to move forward into action. Initially "Das Reich" operated alongside the 3.Panzer-Division, but later saw action with the 9. and 10.Panzer-Divisions. (RM collection)

Two photographs showing an MG section following the capture of a French town. Two abandoned Renault R-35 tanks can be seen with troops examining the vehicles and a dead crew member. (RM collection)

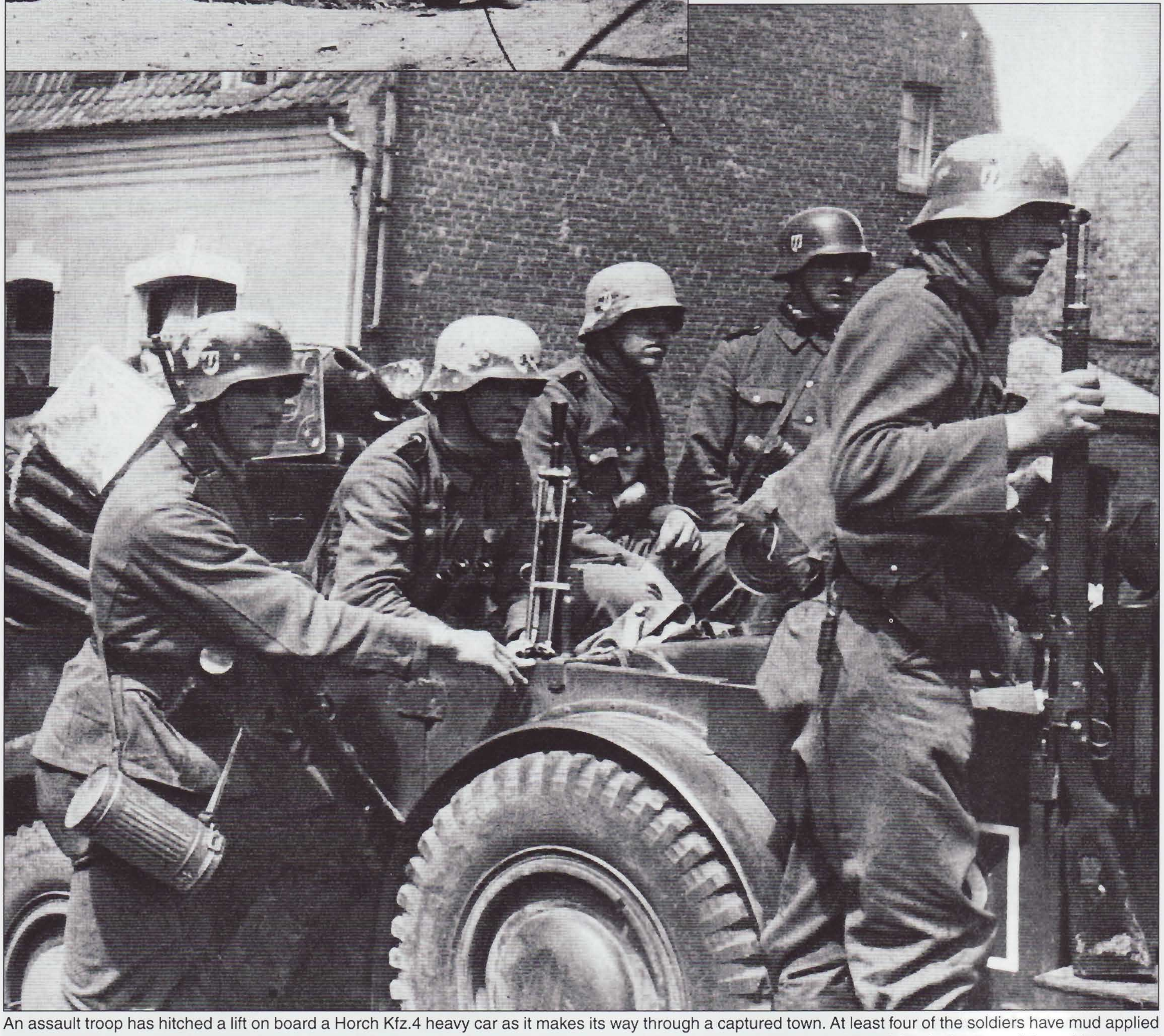


A light MG34 machine gunner moves forward into action. As a light machine gun, it weighed 11.5 kilograms (25 pounds), and gunners could easily carry the weapon over long distances without the need for additional help. (RM collection)



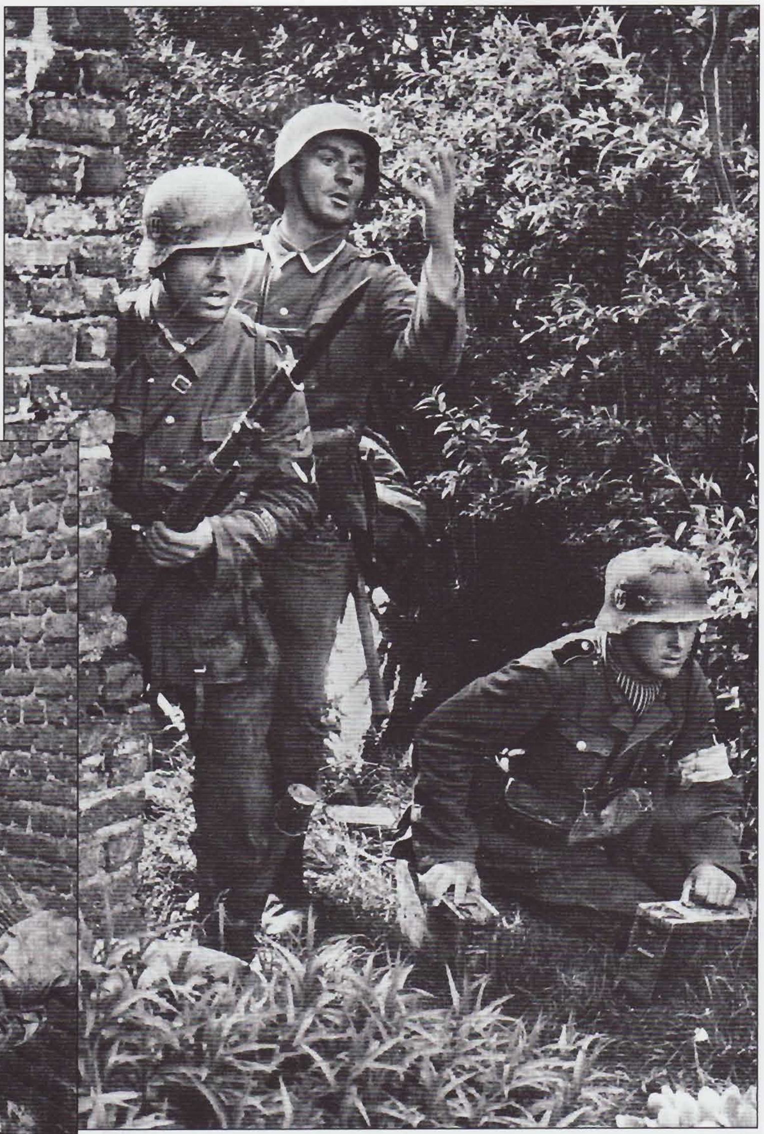


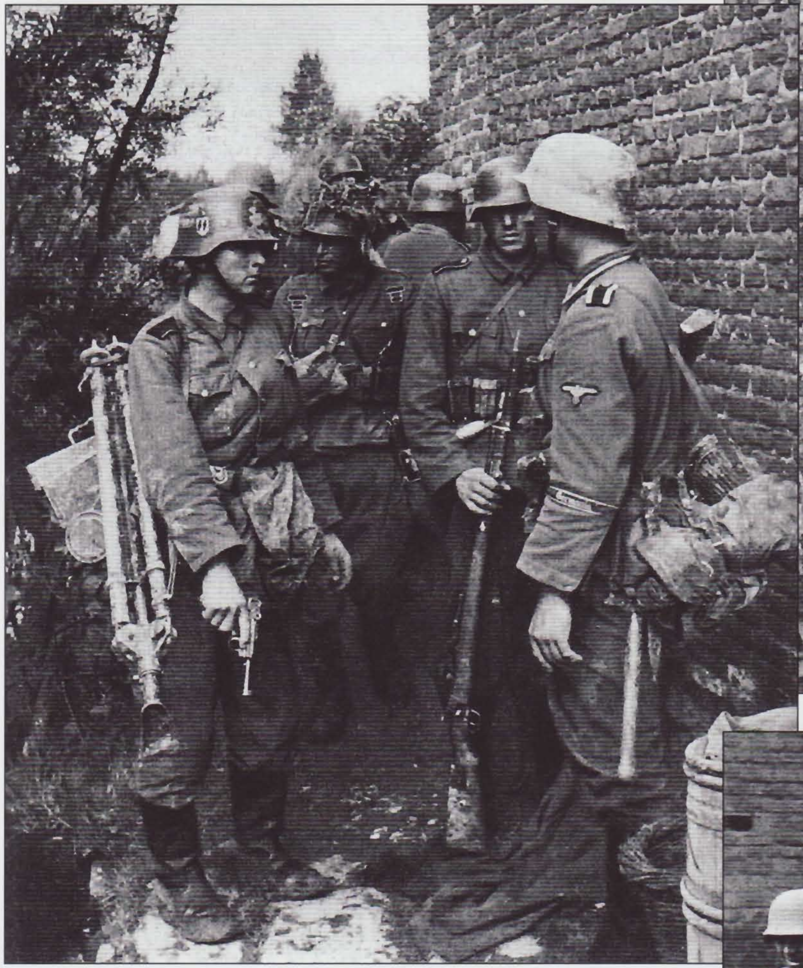
A motorcycle troop moves through one of a number of decimated towns more than likely bombed by the Luftwaffe. Note the various kinds of markings applied on the sidecar combinations. (RM collection)

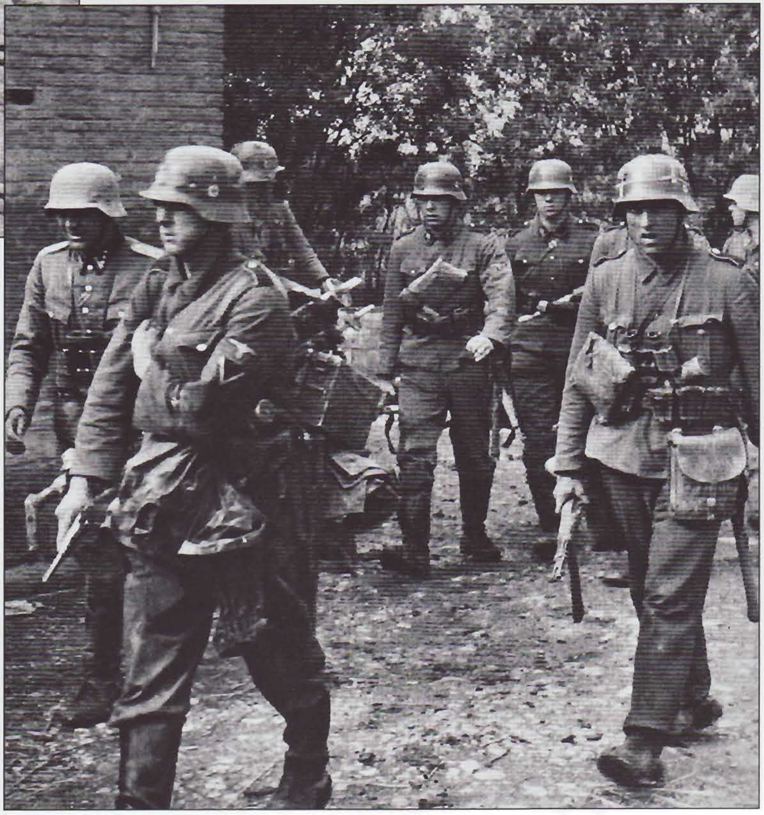


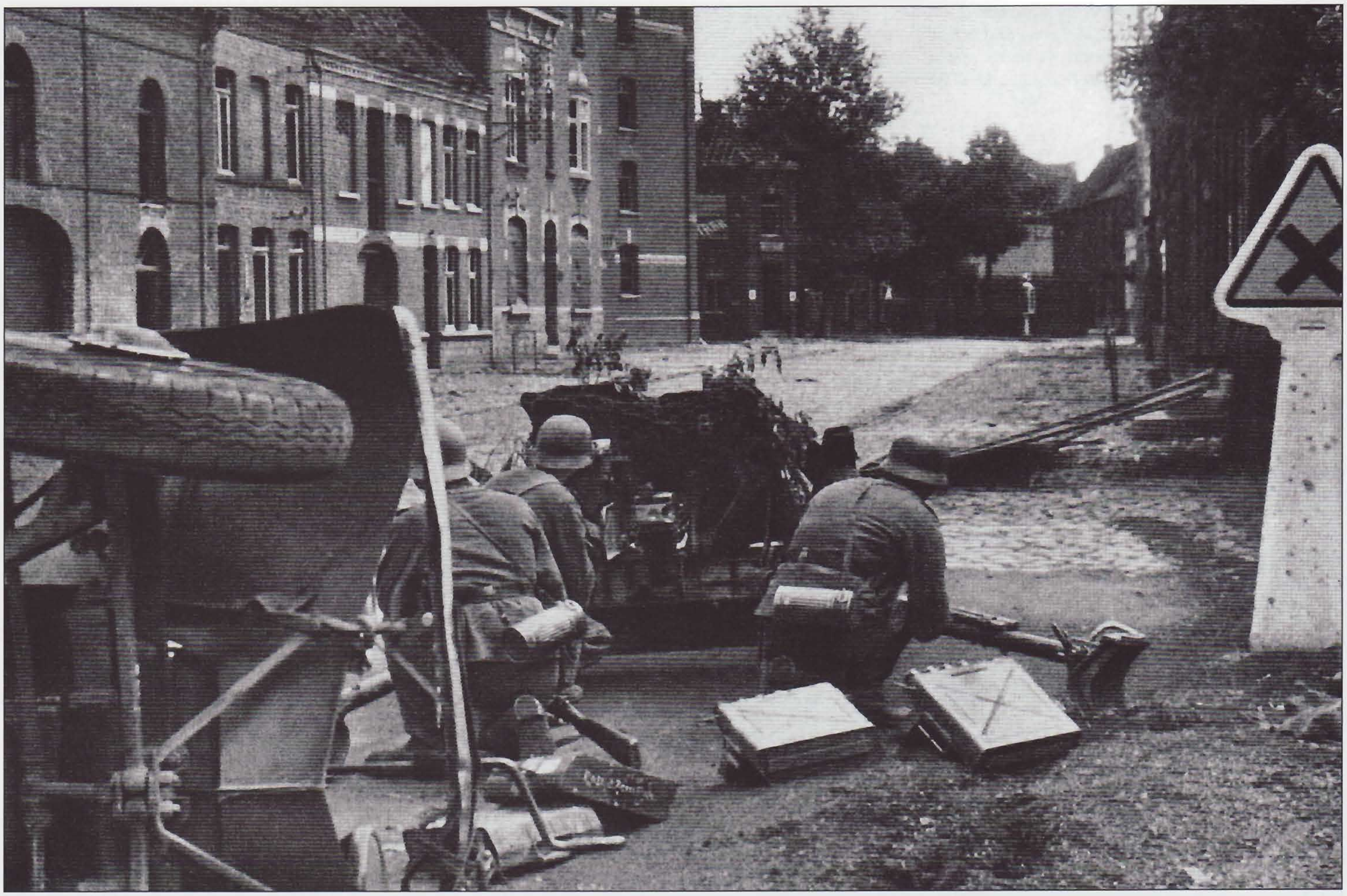
An assault troop has hitched a lift on board a Horch Kfz.4 heavy car as it makes its way through a captured town. At least four of the soldiers have mud applied over their M35 steel helmet in order to afford additional camouflage whilst under battlefield conditions. Note the soldier sitting in the rear of the vehicle armed with an unknown foreign machine gun model. (RM collection)

Three photographs of troops belonging to "Germania" being led into action by an officer holding the rank of an Obersturmführer. One of the soldiers is a medic equipped with special pouches and carrying ammunition boxes for an MG34. A Red Cross armband is attached to his left sleeve. Among other troops is an NCO armed with an MP35 with a P38 holster, and a soldier carrying a Dreifuss 34 mount for his MG34. (RM collection)

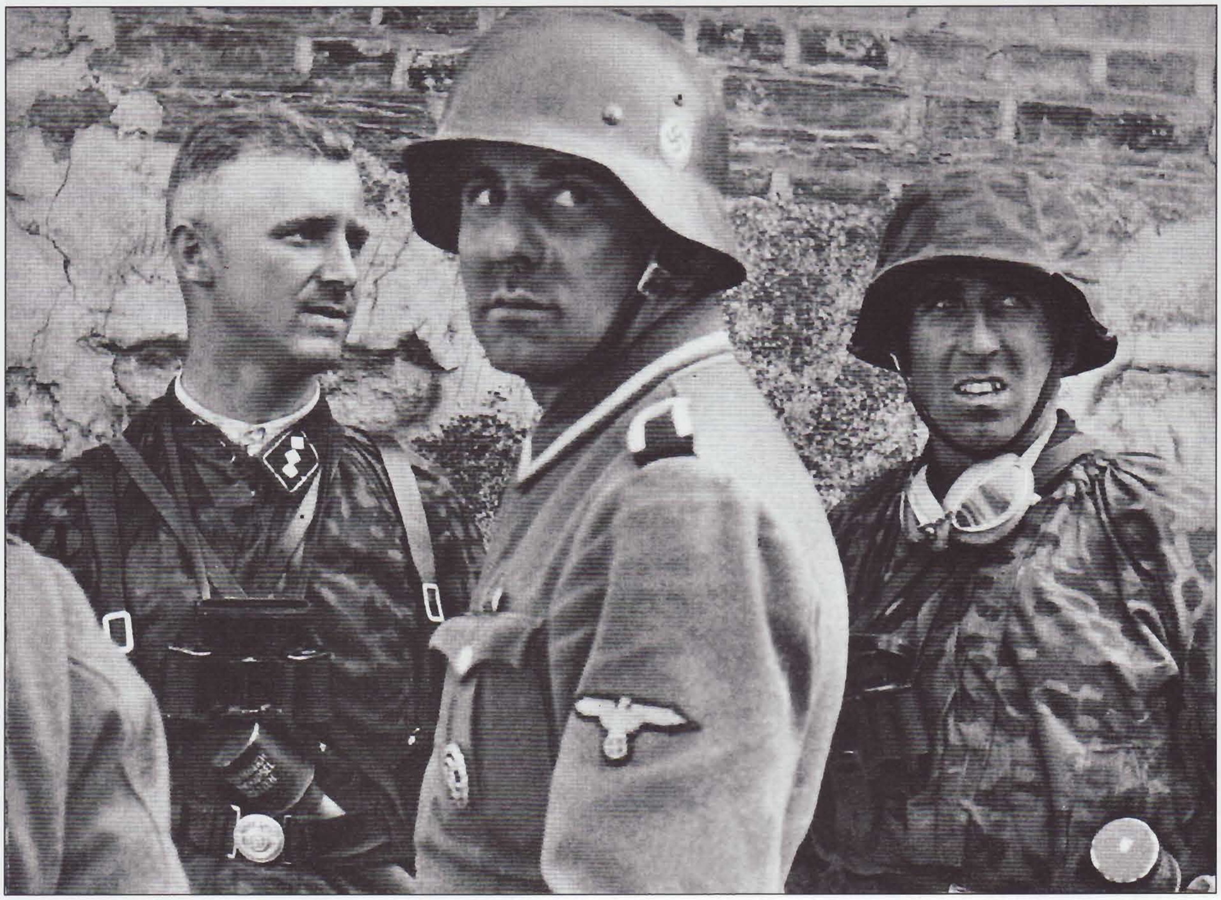




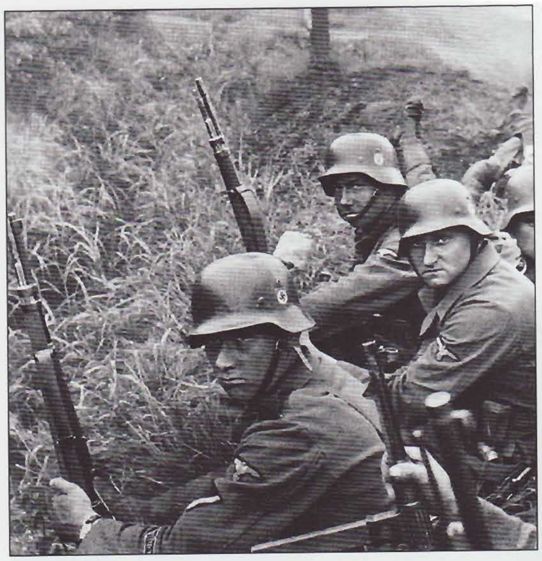




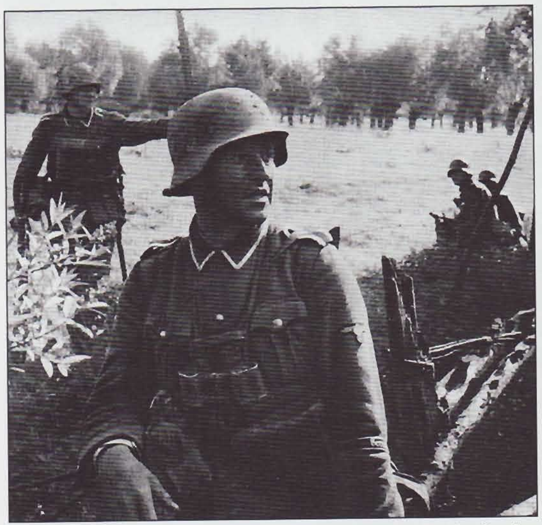
A PaK35/36 crew guards the approaches of road in a town in northern France. The PaK35/36 became the standard anti-tank weapon in both the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS during the early part of the war. It weighed only 432kg and had a sloping splinter shield that afforded minimal protection for the crew. (RM collection)



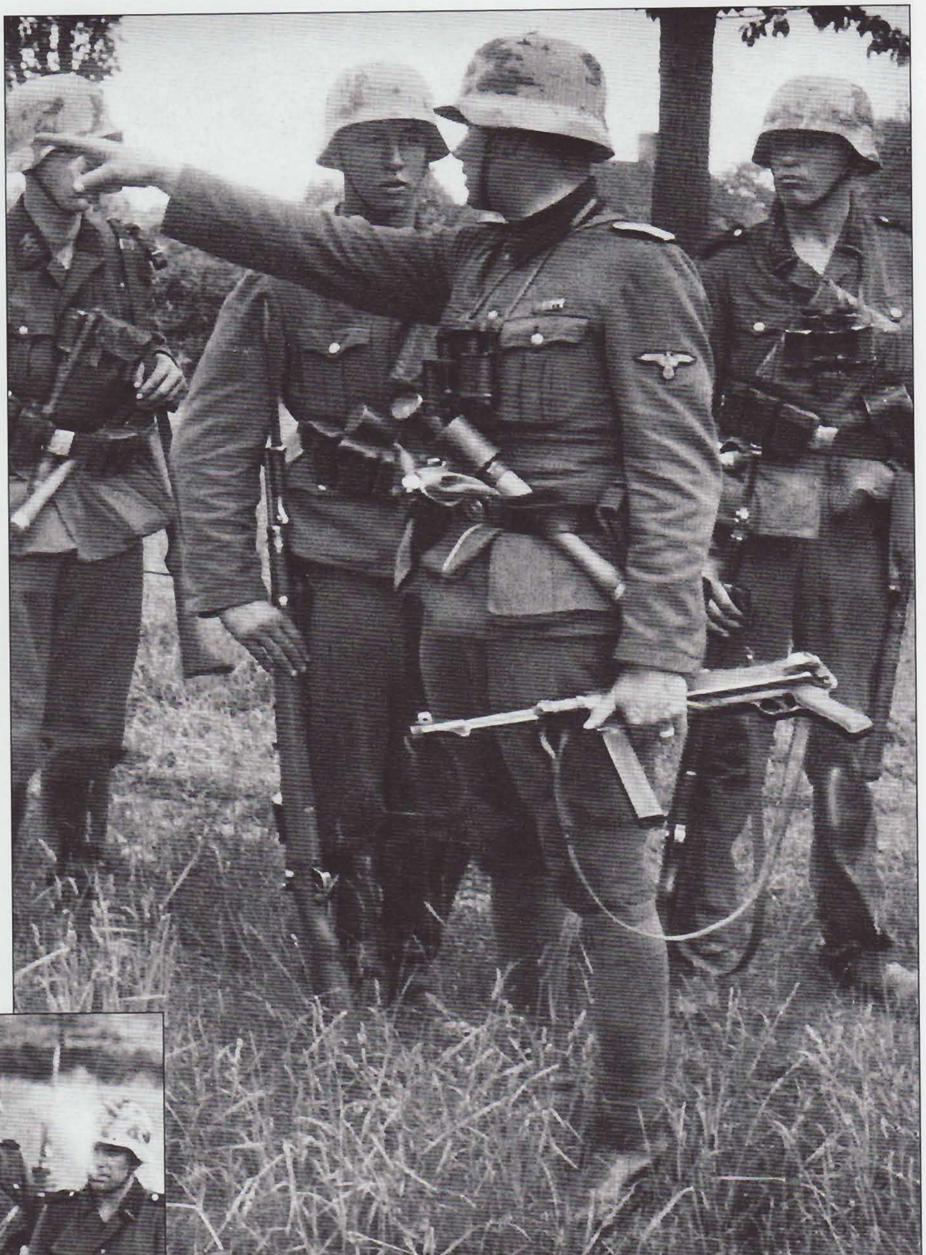
A group of "Das Reich" soldiers with an officer holding the rank of Untersturmführer.
During early June 1940 a total of 140 German divisions were embroiled in the battle of France. On 5 June the LAH and SS-Verfügungs Divisions formed part of Panzergruppe Kleist in the advance on Paris. (RM collection)

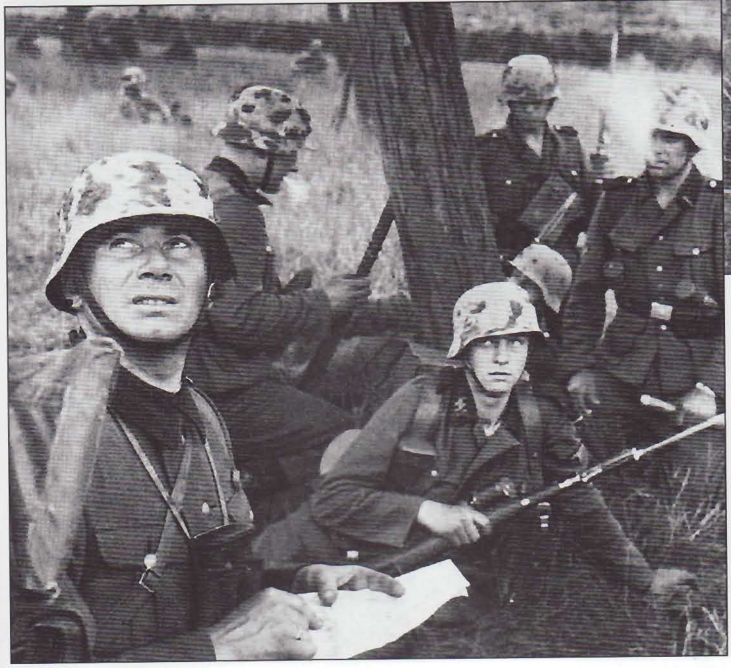


SS troops pause in the march. All of them are armed with the Kar98k bolt action rifle, except the troop leader who can just be seen with an MP40 machine pistol. Throughout the battle of France SS units were normally given little respite as they drove southwards in pursuit of the retreating French forces. (RM collection)



An NCO from the "Germania" Regiment. Typically for this unit he has rank insignia on the shoulder straps and collar, but no SS patches. (RM collection)



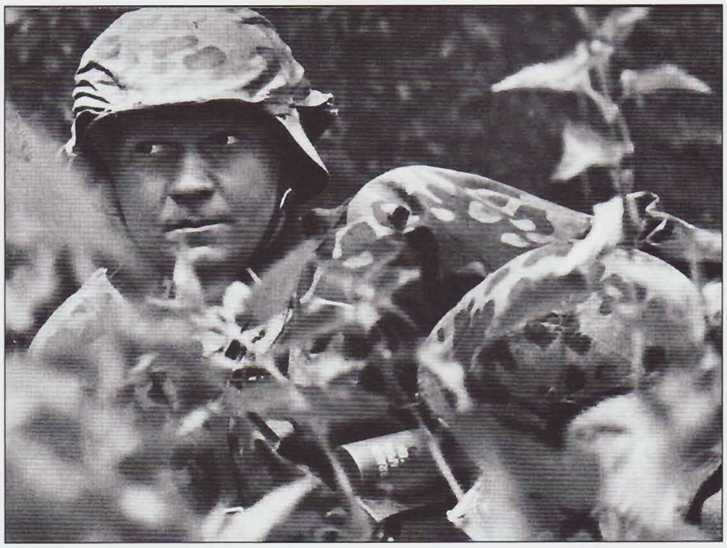


Two photographs showing pioneer troops receiving orders from their commanding officer, who is armed with an early version of the MP40 machine pistol. Note that all the soldiers' M35 steel helmets have been smeared with mud in order to afford additional camouflage protection. (RM collection)

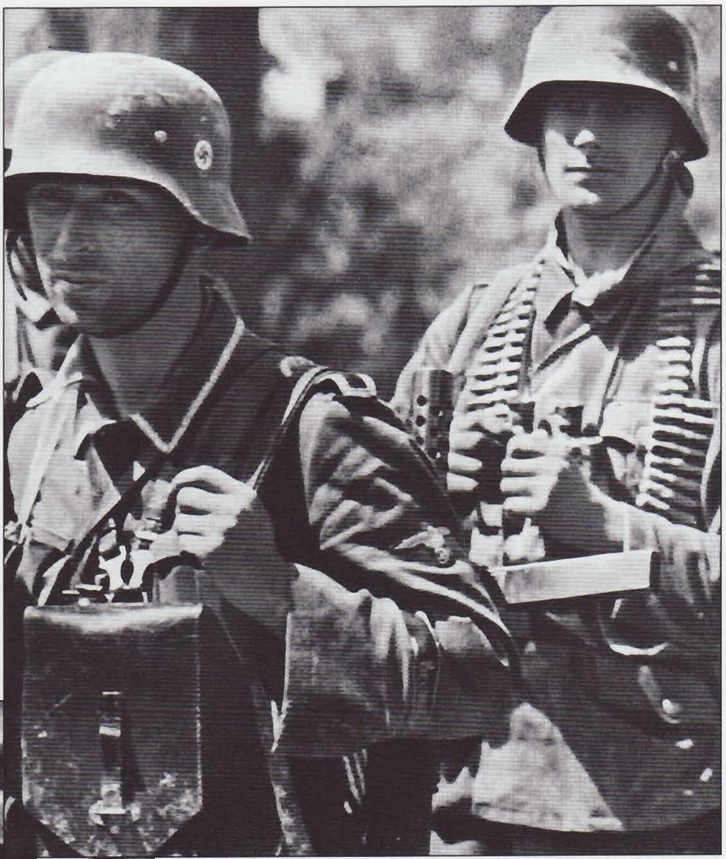
An officer writing a report prior to transmitting it by radio. A British POW is visible in the background lying on the grass. Both British and French forces were stunned by the swift and powerful drive of the SS units that swept across northern France. (RM collection)

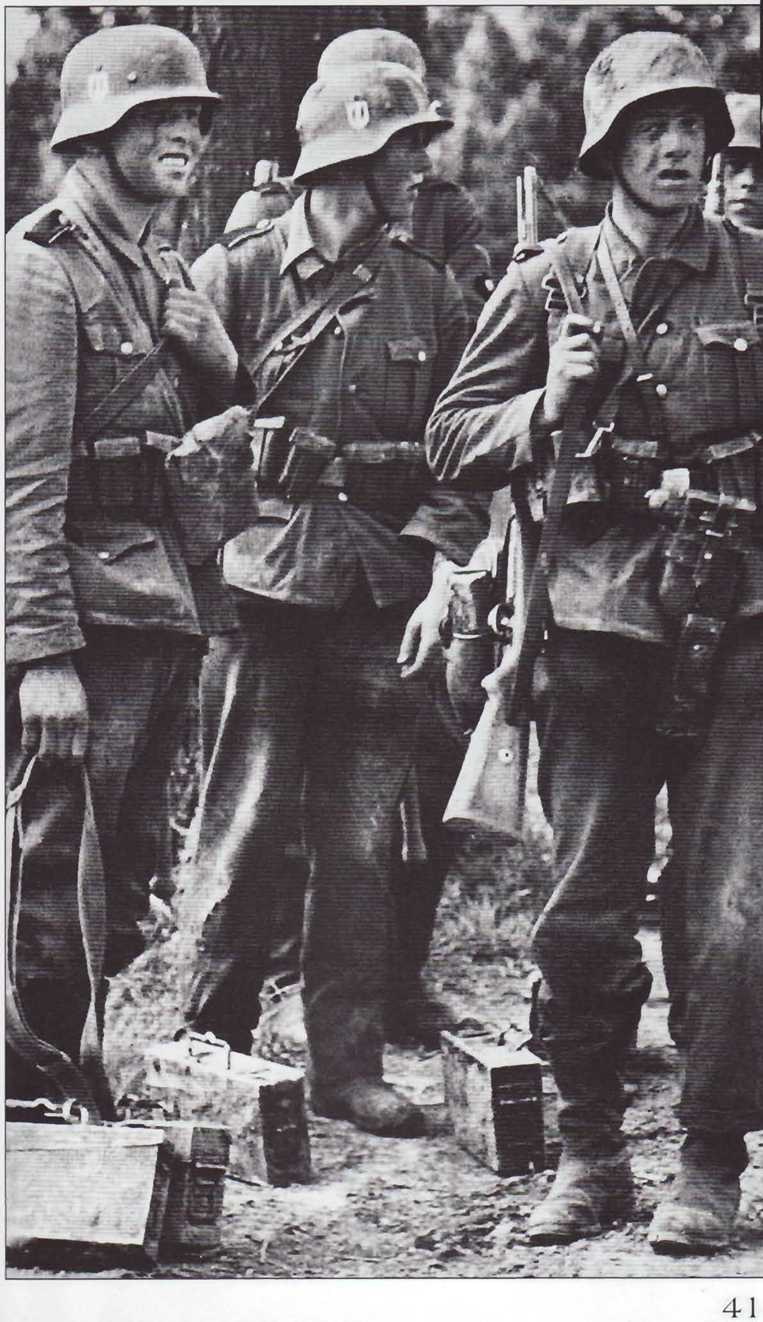
A group of SS NCOs and a Heer officer clamber across a bomb crater. The Heer member in the middle with improvised helmet cover is seen with two Oberscharführer's of the "Das Reich" division. (RM collection)

Two sleeping SS soldiers wearing "plane tree" camouflage smocks. Both are probably from the "Der Führer" Regiment. (RM collection)



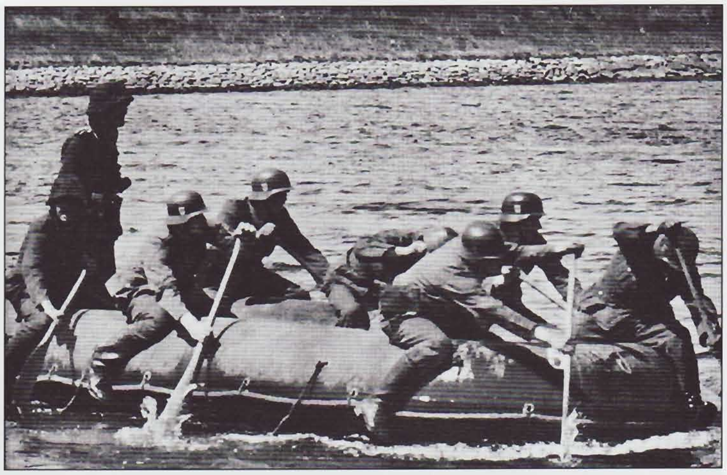
An SS soldier is lying in undergrowth. His "plane tree" camouflage smock and helmet cover blends well with the local terrain. (RM collection)





Two photographs of soldiers belonging to a "Germania" MG troop being led by an NCO. Behind the NCO is an ammunition carrier with a 75-round belt for an MG34. (RM collection)

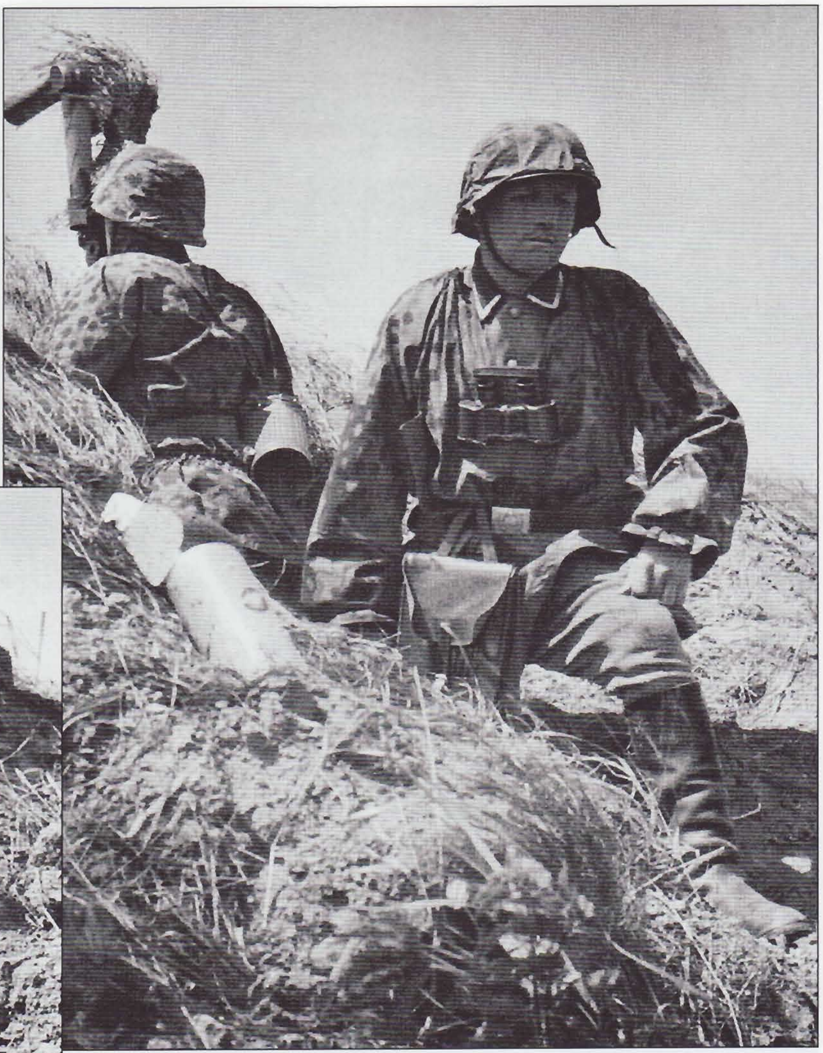
SS Troopers of the "Deutschland" Regiment transporting a six-meter medium pneumatic boat in preparation for a river crossing. The inflatable boat weighed 330 pounds (150 kilograms), but with six men carrying the boat it was able to be pressed into service more rapidly. (RM collection)

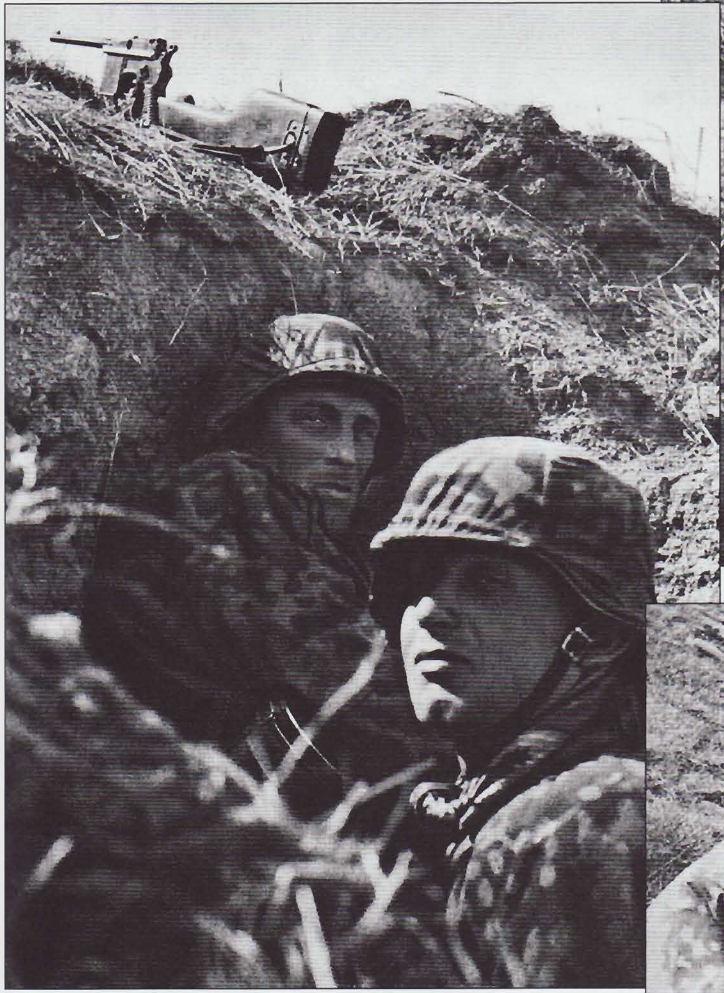


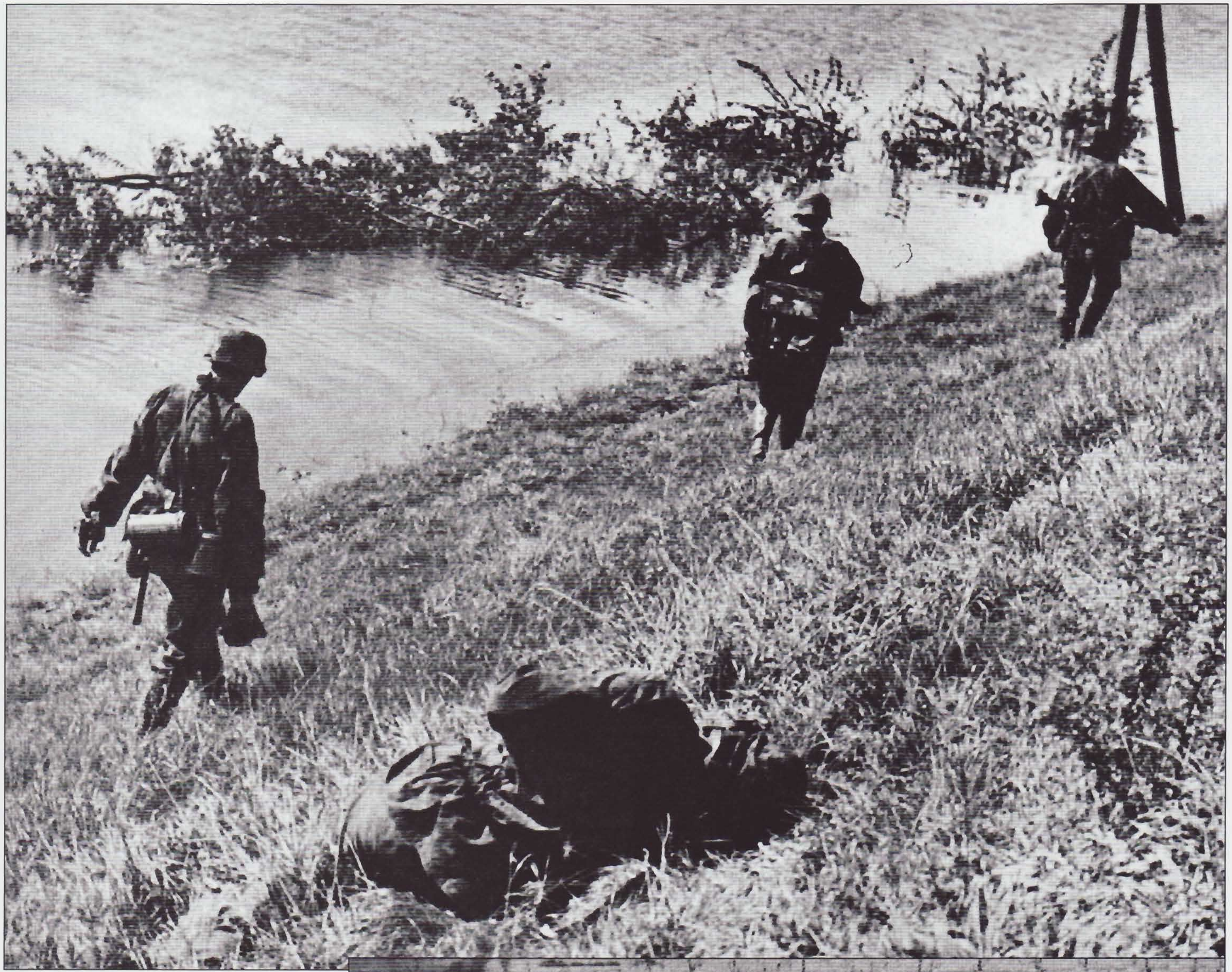
Two photographs of soldiers belonging to the "Deutschland" Regiment inside a six-meter medium pneumatic boat crossing a river. Two paddles either side was normally sufficient enough for the boats to be propelled through the water, even when carrying a full complement of infantry onboard with heavy weapons and equipment. (RM collection)

A heavy weapons section is preparing to cross a river on a six-meter medium pneumatic boat. The first soldier to step onboard is carrying a variety of equipment including a mortar ammunition box and rangefinder. The other two troops are bringing on board the mortar stand and a folded mortar mount. (RM collection)

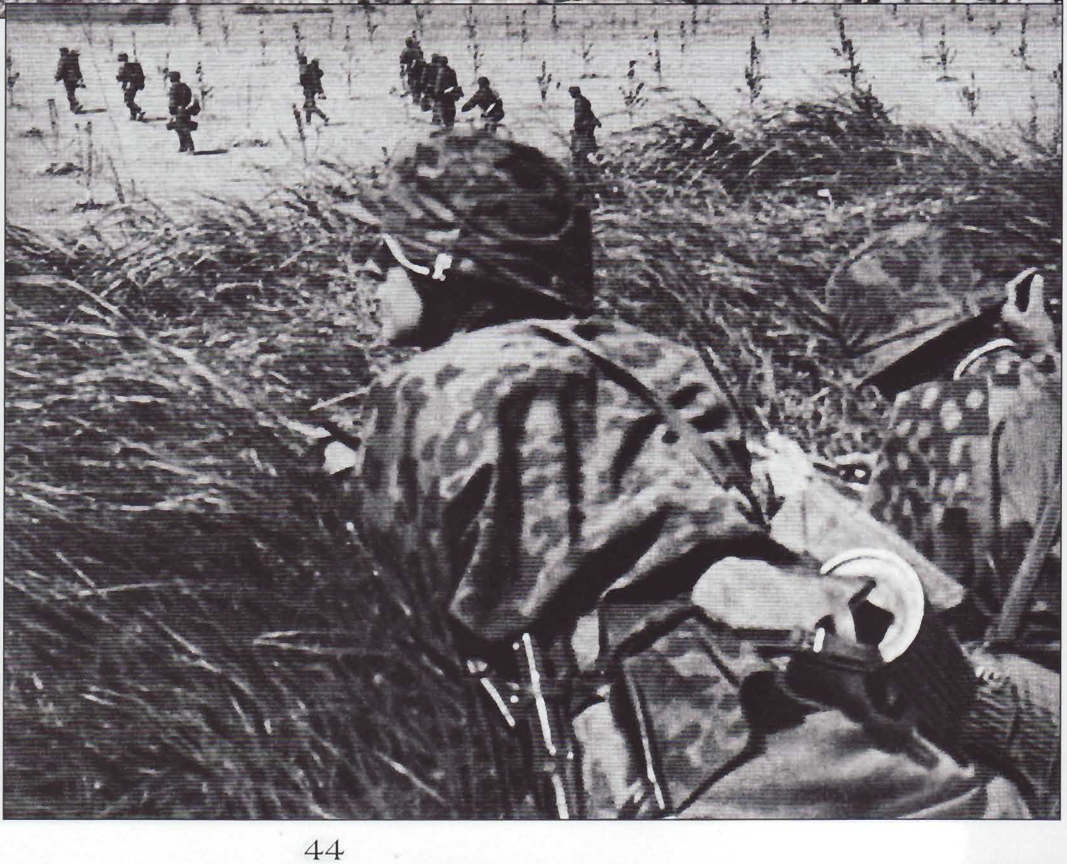
After crossing the river SS soldiers dig into a position along the river bank and observe the terrain ahead for enemy activity with the use of scissor binoculars. River crossings were often hazardous and it was normally imperative that troops immediately took cover before resuming their drive. (RM collection)



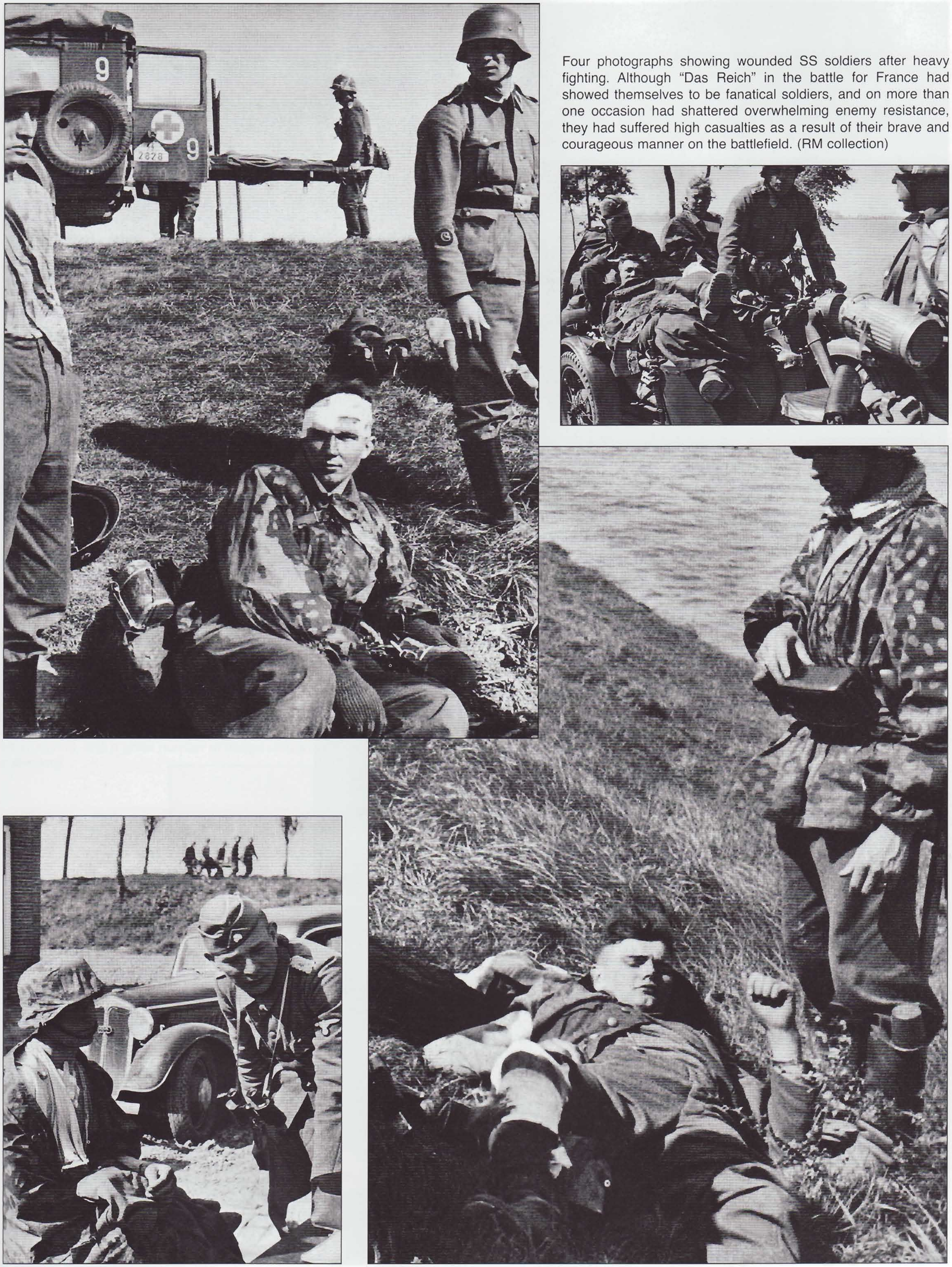




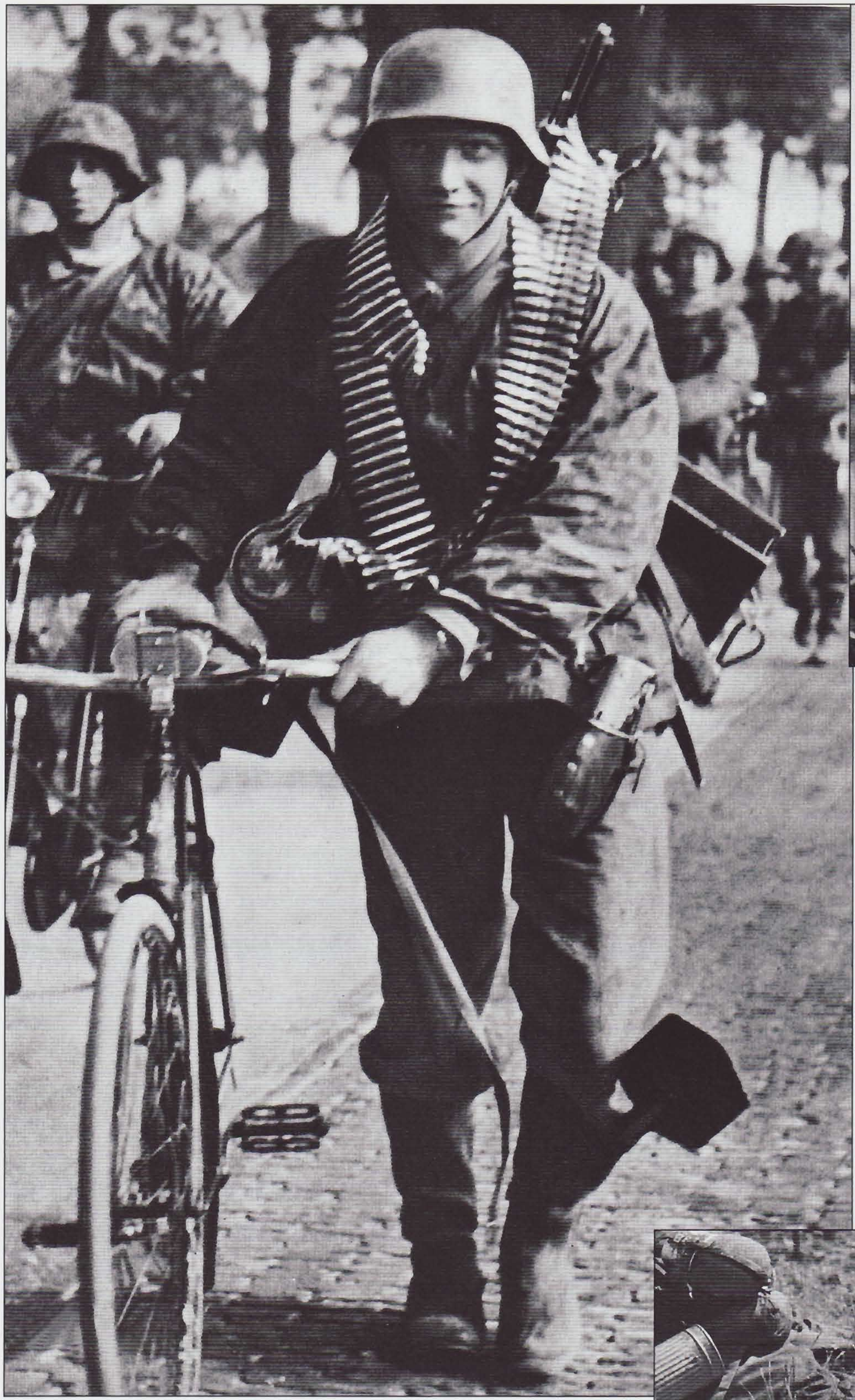
A light MG34 squad moves along the banks of a river. The soldier at the front can be seen armed with the MG34. At a moment's notice the gunner could effectively throw the weapon to the ground and place it almost immediately into operation, with deadly effect.



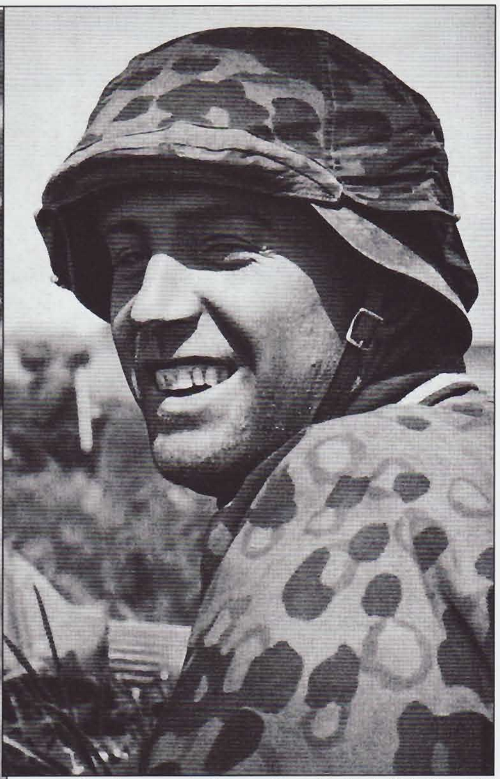
An infantry attack has just been unleashed against enemy positions. From the protection of an embankment soldiers can be seen moving forward under the cover of MG and mortar fire. (RM collection)



Four photographs showing wounded SS soldiers after heavy fighting. Although "Das Reich" in the battle for France had showed themselves to be fanatical soldiers, and on more than one occasion had shattered overwhelming enemy resistance, they had suffered high casualties as a result of their brave and courageous manner on the battlefield. (RM collection)

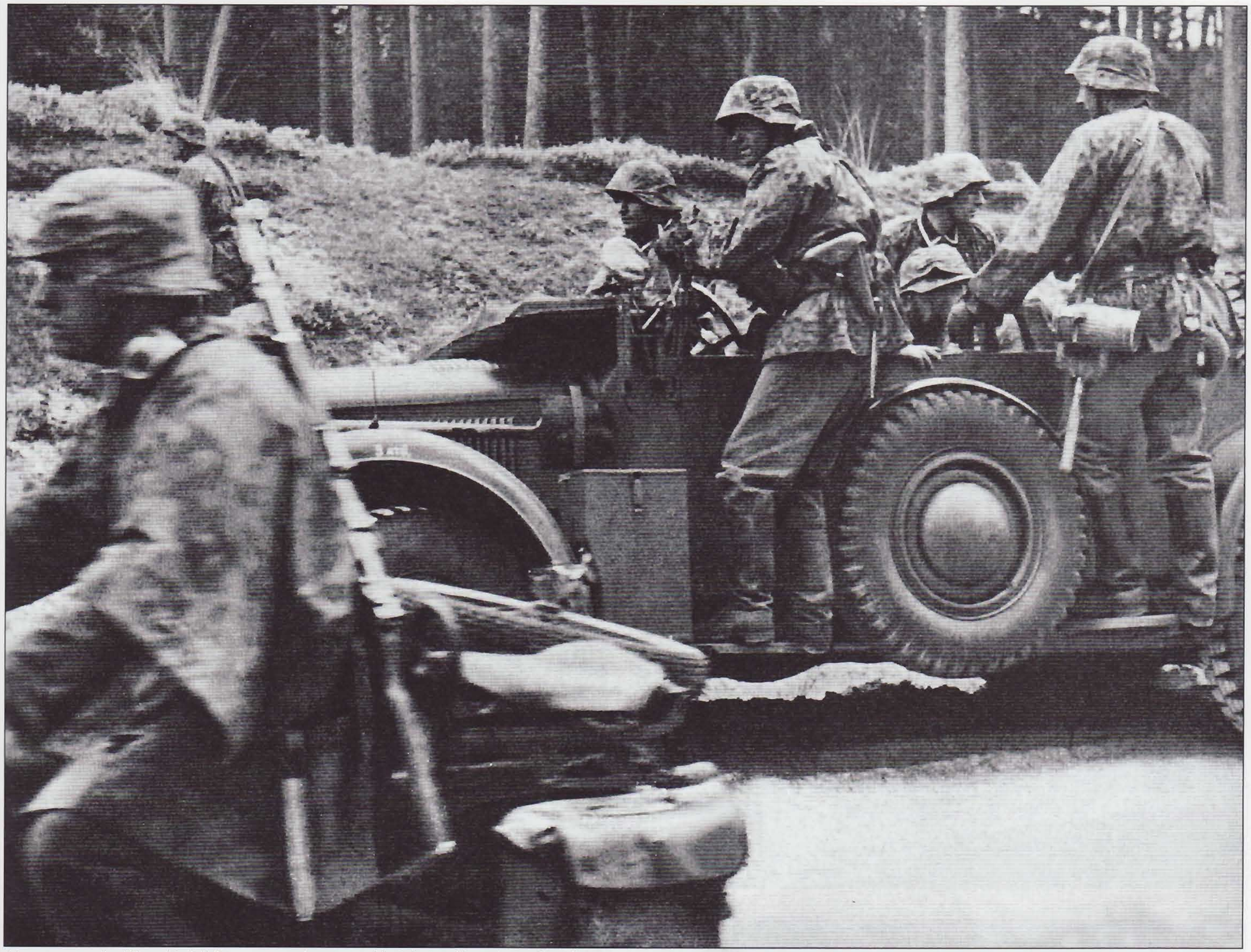


An interesting photograph showing an MG34 ammunition carrier that has utilized a bicycle for transportation. The most common expedient method of carrying machine gun ammunition was either in 250 round boxes or slung around the carrier's neck, as in this picture. (RM collection)

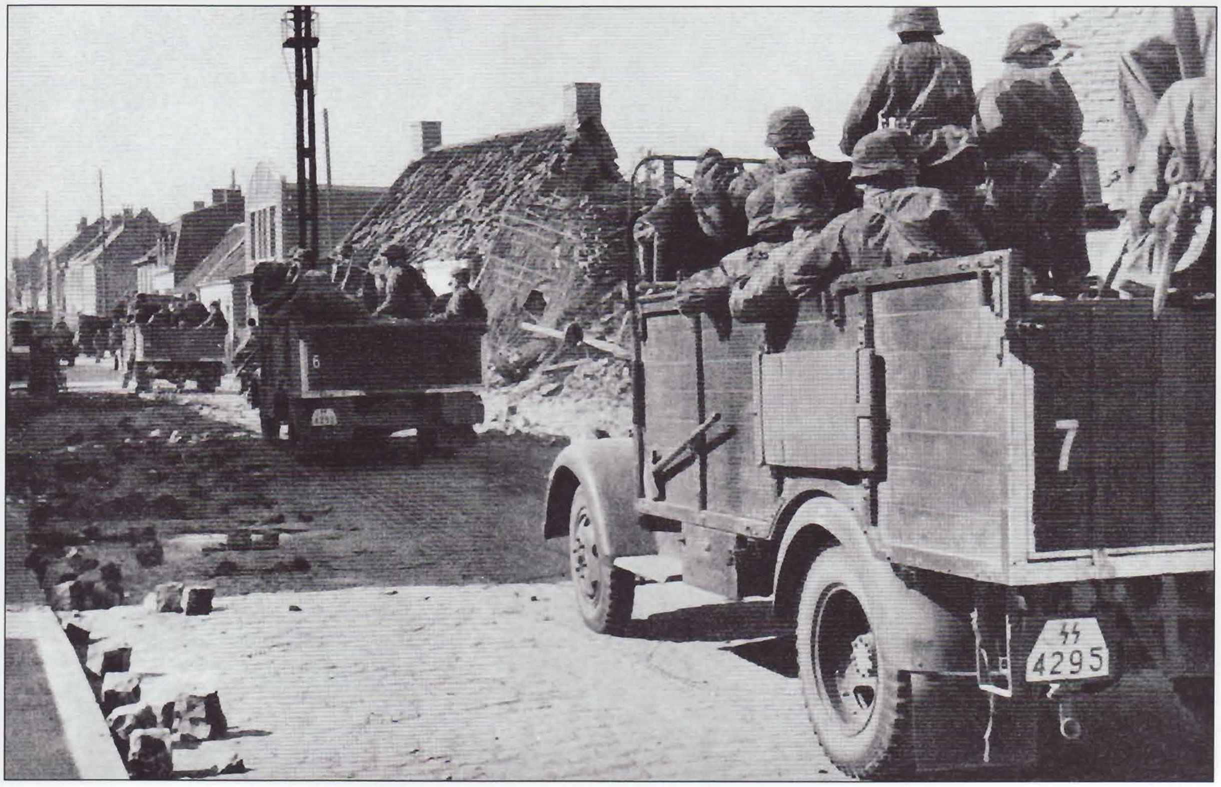


A close-up view of a typical Waffen-SS soldier during the early part of the war. The soldier is wearing a "plane tree" camouflage smock which was still in limited issue at the time of the campaign in France, while the helmet cover was in much wider distribution. This early smock was intended to be worn over the personal equipment. (RM collection)

In a rather relaxed scene a staff officer is planning the next operational move with the aid of a map. Already the Panzer divisions had raced far ahead of the infantry and were now capturing hordes of prisoners and masses of equipment. With victory almost secured units of "Das Reich" were now planning a southward drive through France. (RM collection)



Along a road a "Das Reich" troop can be seen hitching a lift onboard a Kfz.4 Horch heavy car. The long distances in which the soldiers had to march can well be imagined, and a great number of troops utilized various modes of transport to get them from one part of the front to another quickly and efficiently. (RM collection)

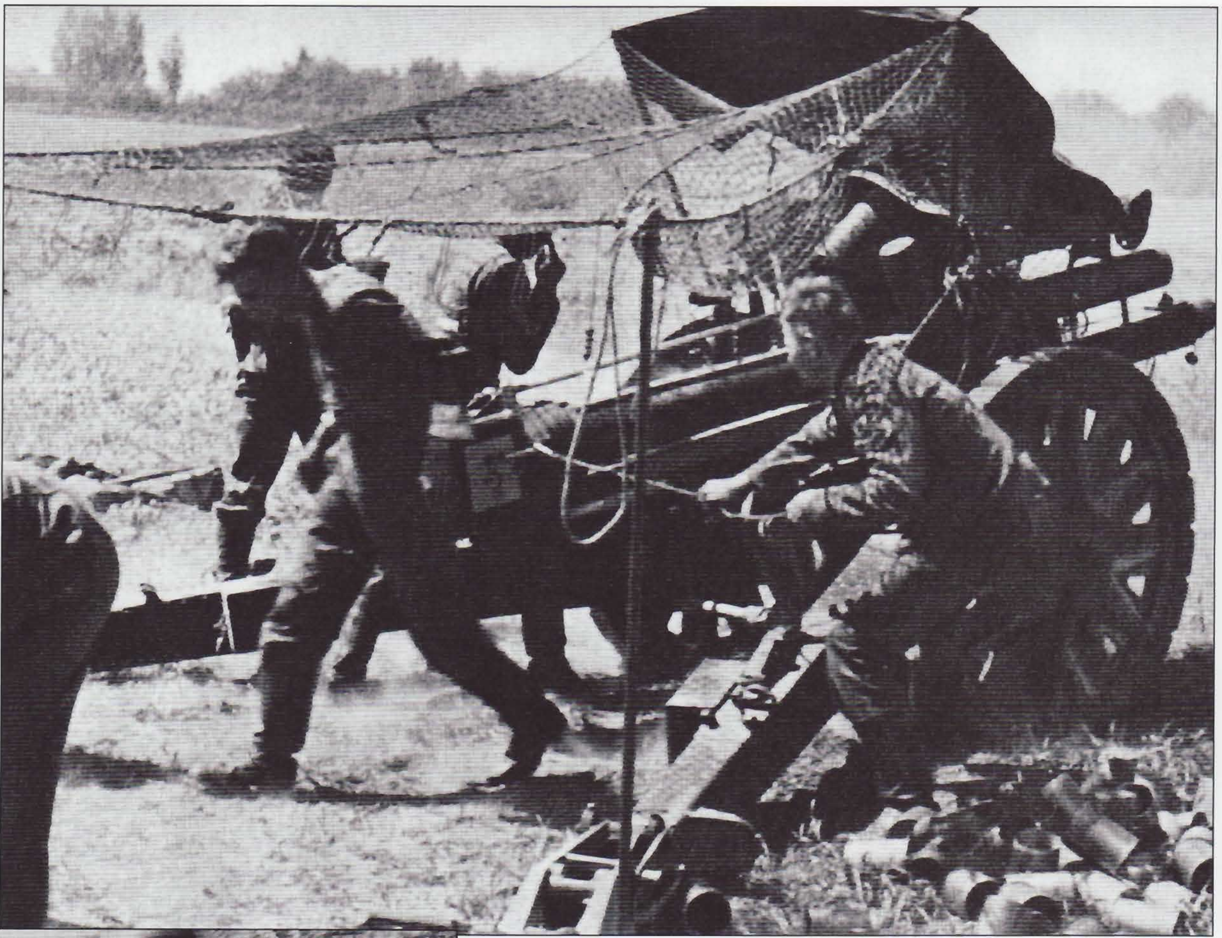


A platoon of "Das Reich" lorry infantry advance through a destroyed town in special version of Opel "Blitz" light trucks. These vehicles were specially designed to carry at least a squad of 12 men including their personal equipment and infantry weapons to the front lines. (RM collection)

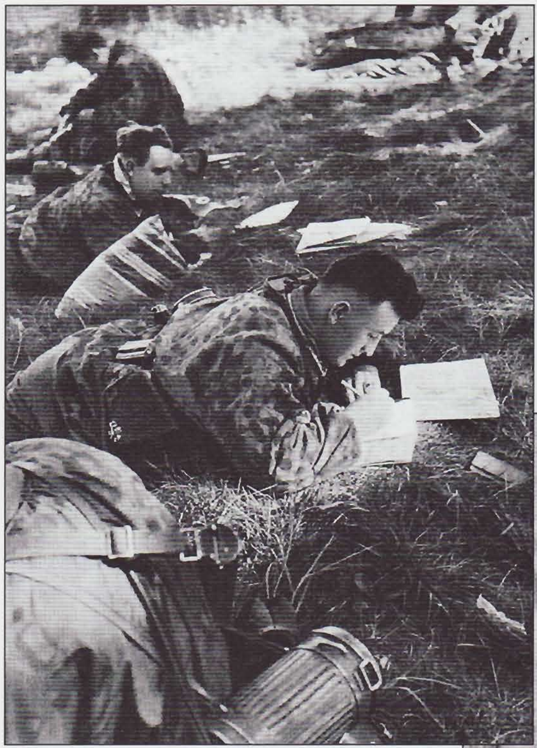
Three photographs showing "Das Reich" motorcyclists. During the early part of the war a great number of motorcyclists rode into battle and dismounted to fight. However, it was soon realized that the riders were vulnerable to small-arms fire and booby traps and gradually they were relegated to communication and reconnaissance duties. (RM collection)

Motorcyclists from the SS 2.Regiment "Germania" pause in their drive south and tuck into some rations before resuming their journey. During the invasion of France motorcyclists were used extensively for reconnaissance duties. (RM collection)

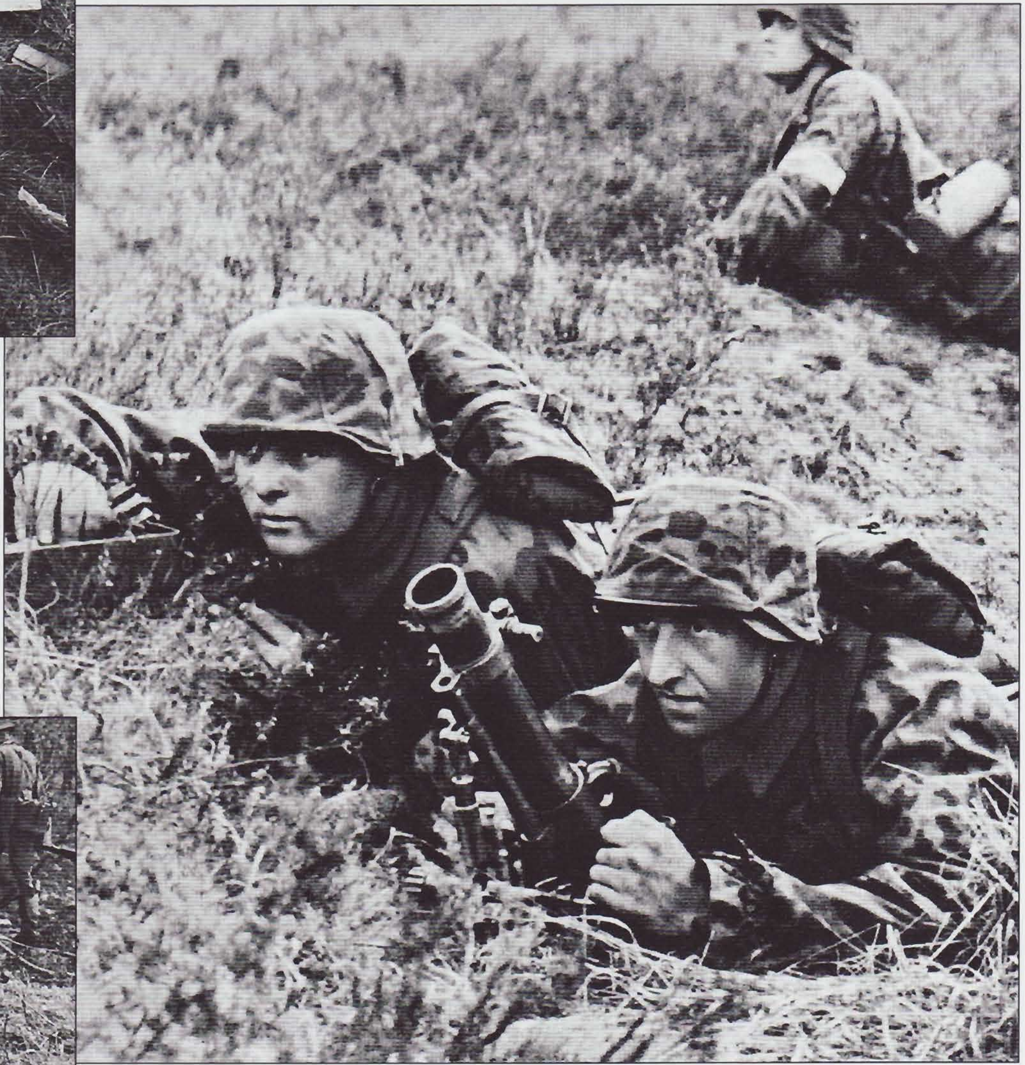
Two photographs taken the moment a 10.5cm le.FH18 is fired against an enemy target. This artillery gun was widely used in the Waffen-SS, especially during the first half of the war. The gun, although very effective, had limited use in the direct role against tanks, as it could only penetrate 52mm of armor plate at a short range of 500-meters. However, in France this did not pose a problem until the campaign in Russia a year later. (RM collection)



"Germania" soldiers take full advantage of fresh milk during their drive south. The troops are milking a cow into their mess tins before resuming their march. (RM collection)

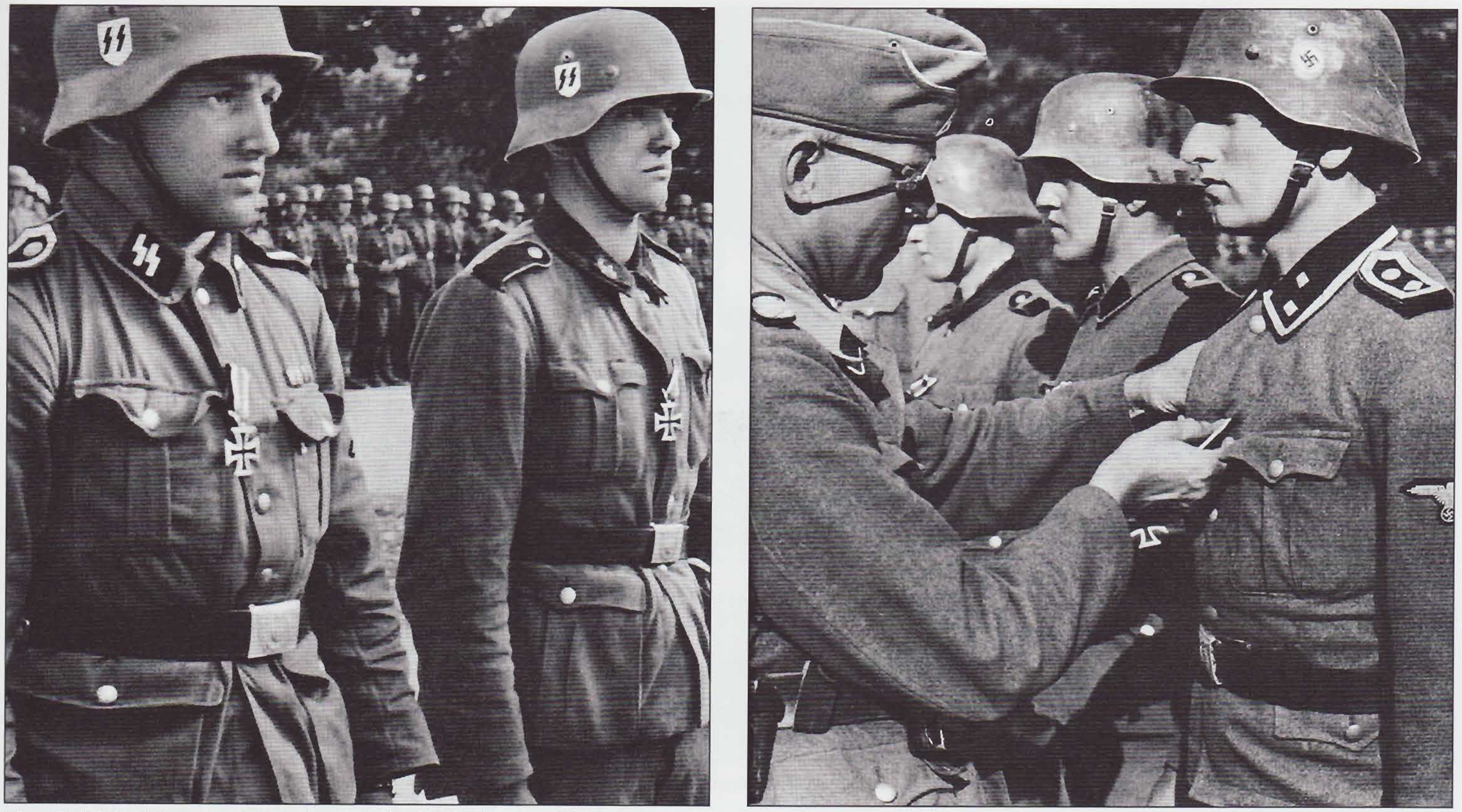


NCOs are seen writing order for their troops in their notebooks. During 'Case Red', code-name for the battle of France, the SS were attached to Panzergruppe Kleist and participated in the drive south of the Somme as a part of Heeresgruppe 'B' in the West. (RM collection)

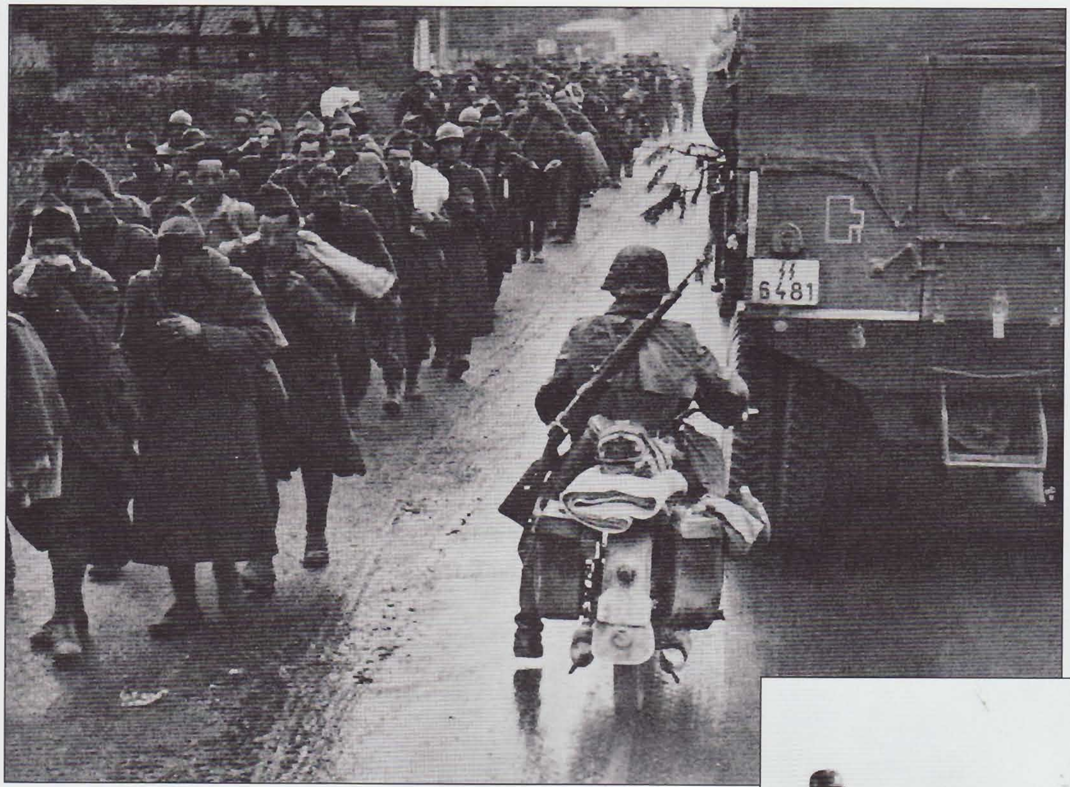


5cm le.GrW 36 mortar team take up their firing position. The le.GrW 36 intended role was to engage pockets of resistance that were beyond the range of hand grenades. The main drawbacks of the weapon were its inadequate range and the limited effectiveness of its ammunition, which were regarded as not heavy enough. (RM collection)

During a pause in the fighting and "Das Reich" soldiers await orders to resume their push. All the men have typical equipment and standard field uniforms. Decals of both SS shields are well visible on all their M35 steel helmets. (RM collection)



"Das Reich" soldiers are being decorated with the famous Eisernekreuz for their bravery in combat. After the defeat of France many SS soldiers received accolades for their bravery and leadership. (RM collection)



As a long column of French POWs are escorted along a road to the rear, passing "Das Reich" lorry infantry and supporting vehicles continue their drive. Note the symbol painted on the rear of the vehicle in white indicating that it belongs to a communications company. (RM collection)

In spite of the victory in France there were inevitable casualties. Although there are no accurate figures of the losses sustained by "Das Reich", German losses amounted to some 27,000 killed, 111,000 wounded and over 18,000 missing.

The final objective of "Das Reich" was a drive south through France where it reached the Spanish border at the end of June 1940. Here in these photographs is a divisional motorcycle troop at a border post posing for the camera with Spanish soldiers. "Das Reich" was the first German unit which reached the southern border of France. After spending a brief period of time guarding the western coast of France near the Pyrenees Mountains, "Das Reich" was relocated to Holland in early July to help oversee the demobilization of Dutch armed forces.

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